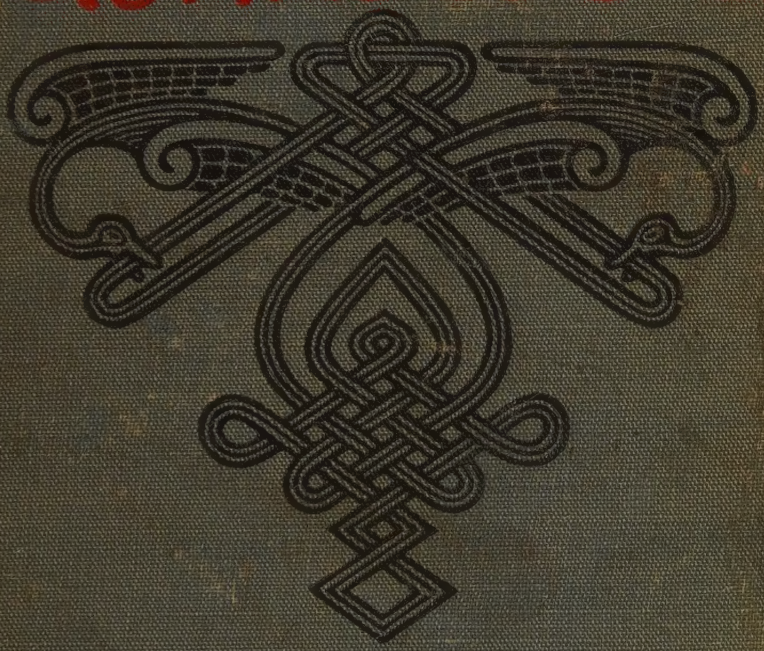
THE WARD OF KING CANUTE



CHILDREN'S COUNTRY HOME

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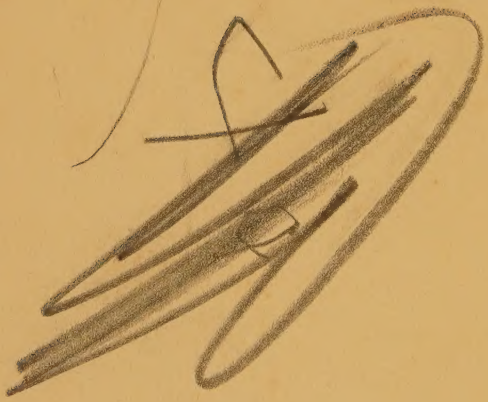
CHILDREN'S COUNTRY HOME



THE WARD OF KING CANUTE

"'Let me through to my Husband.'"

The Ward of King Canute

A Romance of The Danish Conquest

WRITTEN BY

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AUTHOR OF

THE THRALL OF LEIF THE LUCKY

HAVING PICTURES BY TROY & MARGARET WEST KINNEY

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THE KINNEYS

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O. A. L.

CHICAGO, April 1, 1903.

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FOREWORD

THERE is an old myth of a hero who renewed his strength each time he touched the earth, and finally was overcome by being raised in the air and crushed. Whether or not the Angles risked a like fate as they raised themselves away from the primitive virtues that had been their life and strength, no one can tell; but it has been well said that when Northern blood mingled with English blood at the time of the Danish Conquest, the Anglo-Saxon race touched the earth again.

The Ward of King Canute

CHAPTER I

THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF FRODE

Full stocked folds
I saw at the sons of Fitjung,
Now they carry beggars' staffs;
Wealth is
Like the twinkling of an eye,
The most unstable of friends.

HÁVAMÁL.

AS the blackness of the midsummer night paled, the broken towers and wrecked walls of the monastery loomed up dim and stark in the gray light. The long-drawn sigh of a waking world crept through the air and rustled the ivy leaves. The pitying angel of dreams, who had striven all night long to restore the plundered shrine and raise from their graves the

band of martyred nuns, ceased from his ministrations, softly as a bubble frees itself from the pipe that shaped it, and floated away on the breath of the wind. Through a breach in the moss-grown wall, the first sunbeam stole in and pointed a bright finger across the cloister garth at the charred spot in the centre, where missals and parchment rolls had made a roaring fire to warm the invaders' blood-stained hands.

As the lark rose through the brightening air to greet the coming day, a woman in the tunic and cowl of a nun opened what was left of the wicket-gate in the one unbattered wall. A trace of the luxury that had dwelt under the gilded spires survived in her robes, which had been of a royal purple and embroidered with silken flowers; but the voice of Time and of Ruin spoke from them also, for the purple was faded to a rusty brown, and the silken embroideries were threadbare. She struck a note in perfect harmony with her surroundings, as she stood under the crumbling arch, peering out into the flowering lane.

Stretching away from her feet in dewy freshness, it made a green link between the herb-garden of St. Mildred's and the highway of the Watling Street. Like the straggling hedges that were half buried under a net of wild roses, red and white, the path was half effaced by grass; but beyond, her eye could follow the straight line of the great Roman road over marsh and meadow and hill-top. If grass had gathered there also, during the Anglo-Saxon times, there were no traces of it now,

in the days of Edmund Ironside when Canute of Denmark was leading his war-host back and forth over its stones. Between the dark walls of oak and beech, it gleamed as white as the Milky Way. The nun was able to trace its course up the slope of the last hill. Just beyond the crest, a pall of smoke was spread over a burning village. Though it was miles away, it seemed to her that the wind brought cries of anguish to her ear, and prayers for mercy. Shivering, she turned her face back to the desolate peace of the ruins.

"Now is it clear to all men why a bloody cloud was hung over the land in the year that Ethelred came to the throne," she said. "I feel as the blessed dead might feel should they be forced to leave the shelter of their graves and look out upon the world."

Rising from its knees beside a bed of herbs, a second figure in faded robes approached the gate. Sister Sexberga was very old, much older than her companion, and her face was a wrinkled parchment whereon Time had written some terrible lessons.

She said gently, "We are one with the dead, beloved sister. Those who lie under the chancel lay no safer than we, last night, though the Pagans' passing tread shook the ground we lay on, and their songs broke our slumbers. Let us cease not to give thanks to Him who has spread over us the peace of the grave."

The shadows deepened in the eyes of Sister Wynfreda as she turned them back toward the lane, for her

patience was not yet ripe to perfect mellowness. She was but little past the prime of her rich womanhood, and still bore the traces of a great beauty. She bore in addition, upon cheek and forehead, the scars of three frightful burns.

"The peace of the grave can never be mine while my heart is open to the sorrows of others," she answered with sadness. "Sister Sexberga, that was an English band which passed last night. I made out English words in their song. I am in utmost fear for the Danes of Avalcomb."

"'They that take the sword shall perish with the sword,'" the old nun quoted, a little sternly. "An Englishman was despoiled of his lands when Frode the Dane took Avalcomb. If now Frode's turn has come —"

Her companion made a gesture of entreaty. "It is not for Frode that I am timorous, dear sister, nor for the boy, Fridtjof; it is for Randalin, his daughter."

Sister Sexberga was some time silent. When at last she spoke, it was but to repeat slowly, "Randalin, his daughter. God pity her!"

Sister Wynfreda was no longer listening. She had quitted her hold upon the gate and taken a step forward, straining her eyes. They had not deceived her. Out of a tall mass of golden bloom at the farther end of the lane, an arm clad in brown homespun had tossed itself for one delirious instant. Trailing her robes over the daisied grass, the nun came upon a wounded man lying face downward in the tangle.

There was little in that to awaken surprise; it would have been stranger had warriors passed without leaving some such mute token in their wake. Yet when the united strength of the four arms had turned the limp weight upon its back, a cry of astonishment rose from each throat.

"The woodward of Avalcomb!"

"The hand of the Lord hath fallen!"

After a moment the younger woman said in a trembling voice, "The whisper in my heart spoke truly. Dearest sister, put your arm under here, and we will get him to his feet and bring him in, and he will tell us what has happened. See! he is shaking off his swoon. After he has swallowed some of your wine, he will be able to speak and tell us."

It was muscle-breaking work for women's backs, for though he tried instinctively to obey their directions, the man was scarcely conscious; his arms were like lead yokes upon his supporters' shoulders. Just within the gate their strength gave out, and they were forced to put him down among the spicy herbs. There, as one was pulling off her threadbare cloak to make him a pillow, and the other was starting after her cordial, he opened his eyes.

"Master!" he muttered. "Master? Have they gone?"

In an instant Sister Wynfreda was on her knees beside him. "Is it the English you mean? Did they beset the castle?"

Slowly the man's clouded eyes cleared. "The Sisters — " he murmured. "I had the intention — to get to you — but I fell — " His words died away in a whisper, and his eyelids drooped. Sister Sexberga turned again to seek her restorative. Sister Wynfreda leaned over and shook him.

"Answer me, first. Where is your master? And young Fridtjof? And your mistress?"

He shrank from her touch with a gasp of pain. "Dead," he muttered. "Dead — At the gate — Frode and the boy — The raven-starvers cut them down like saplings."

"And Randalin?"

"I heard her scream as the Englishman seized her — Leofwinesson had her round the waist — they knocked me on the head, then — I — I — " Again his voice died away.

Sister Wynfreda made no attempt to recall him. Mechanically she held his head so that her companion might pour the liquid down his throat. That done, she brought water and bandages, and stood by, absent-eyed and in silence, while Sexberga found his wounds and dressed them. It was the older woman who spoke first.

"The fate of this maiden lies heavy on your mind, beloved," she said tenderly; "and I would have you know that my heart also is sorrowful. For all that she is the fruit of darkness, it was permitted by the Lord that Randalin, Frode's daughter, should be born with a light in her soul. It was in my prayers that

we might be enabled to feed that light as it were a sacred lamp, to the end that in God's good time the spreading glory of its brightness might deliver her from the shadows forever."

Staring before her with unseeing eyes, Sister Wynfreda nodded an absent assent. "To me also it seemed that the Lord had led her to us . . . I keep in mind how she looked when she came that first morning . . . a bit of silk was in her hand, which Frode had given her for a present, because a golden apple was wrought upon it. She came on her horse, with the boy Fridtjof, to offer us bread from the castle kitchen if we would agree to teach her the secret of such handiwork. And when we said that for the sake of bread to lighten the evil days we would comply with her in the matter, she laughed with pleasure, and her laughter was as grateful to the ear as the chime of matin bells. I can see her again as she sat above us in her saddle, laughing: her long hair blew about her, and the red blood glowed in her cheeks, and her eyes were like pools that the sun is shining on—" Suddenly the Sister's voice broke, and she hid her face in her hands.

The old nun regarded her compassionately. Hers had been a long hard life, and she was very near the mountain-top from whose summit the mystery of the valleys is revealed.

After a time she spoke with tender reverence: "Almighty Father, who hast given us strength to endure our own trials without murmuring, grant us also

the grace to accept patiently the chastening of those we love."

The bowed head of Sister Wynfreda sank lower, and slowly the heaving of her breast was stilled. In the chapel four feeble old voices raised a chant that trembled and shook like a quivering heart-string.

"I beseech thee now,
Lord of Heaven,
And pray to thee,
Best of human-born,
That thou pity me,
Mighty Lord!
And aid me,
Father Almighty,
That I thy will
May perform
Before from this frail life
I depart."

Tremulously sweet it drifted out over the garden and blended with the aroma in the air. The wounded man smiled through his pain.

Raising her tear-stained face at last, Sister Wynfreda said humbly, "God pardon me if I sin in my grief, but to me it seems so bitter a thing when trouble comes upon the young. The first fall of the young bird in its flight, the first blow that startles the young horse, — I flinch before them as before my own wounds. When the light of the fair young day dies before the noon, I feel the shadow in my heart; and it saddens me to find a flower that worms have eaten in the bud and robbed of its brief life in the sun. How much

more, then, shall I grieve for the blighting of this human flower? I declare with truth that the first time I saw her my heart went out to her in a love which taught me how mothers feel. Her freshness and gladness have fed my starved heart like wine. I cannot bear that trouble should crush them out of her in the very flower of her youth; I cannot bear that tears should wear channels down her soft cheeks and dim the brightness of her eyes. Sooner would I give what remains to me of life! Sister, do I sin? Do I seem to murmur against His will? But I have grown used to suffering, while she — what has she known but love? Oh, have I not suffered enough for both? Could she not have been spared?" Her voice mounted to a cry of exceeding bitterness.

Sister Sexberga rose, stretching toward her a tremulous pitying hand. The light that shines on the mountain-top was very bright on her wrinkled old face. She said softly, "It is not for me to say that you sin in your grief, most dear sister. But I give you this thought for your comfort: if you, who are tied to her by no bond of the flesh can feel for her so great and brooding an affection, what then must be the love of Him who fashioned her fair young body and lit the light of her glad spirit? Of a surety its tender yearning can be no less than yours. It may be that with tears He would wash the dust of the world from her eyes, that her sight may be clear for a vision of holier things. But believe that, even as you would shelter her, so will He not forsake her in her helpless-

ness. Believe, and be eased of your fear." A rustling of her robe across the grass, and she was gone.

The chant ceased, the wavering treble dying away in a note of haunting sweetness. The man moaned and clutched at his wound; and the bowed figure by his side roused herself to tend him. Then a grating of rusty hinges made her turn her head.

Under the crumbling arch, relieved against the green of the lane beyond, stood the figure of a slender boy wrapped in a mantle of scarlet that bore a strangely familiar look. His hair fell upon his shoulders in soft wavy locks of raven blackness; but his face was turned away as his hands fumbled at the fastening.

Sister Wynfreda rose and took a step forward, staring at him in bewilderment.

"Fridtjof?" she questioned.

At the sound of her voice, the boy turned and hastened toward her. Then a great cry burst from Sister Wynfreda, for the face under the black locks was the face of Randalin.

CHAPTER II

RANDALIN, FRODE'S DAUGHTER

> At a hoary speaker
> Laugh thou never.
> Often is good that which the aged utter;
> Oft from a shrivelled hide
> Discreet words issue.
>
> HÁVAMÁL.

HE made a convincing boy, this daughter of the Vikings. Though she was sixteen, her graceful body had retained most of the lines and slender curves of childhood; and she was long of limb and broad of shoulder. Her head was poised alertly above her strong young throat, and she was as straight as a fir-tree and as supple as a birch. A life out-of-doors had given to her skin a tone of warm brown, which, in a land that expected women to be lily-fair, was like a mask added to her disguise. The blackness of her hair was equally unconnected with Northern dreams of beautiful maidens. "Dark-haired women, like slaves, black and bad," was the proverb of the Danish camps. Some fair-tressed

ancestor back in the past must have qualified his blood from the veins of an Irish captive; in no other way could one account for those locks, and for her eyes that were of the grayish blue of iris petals.

The eyes were a little staring this morning, as though still stretched wide with the horror of the things they had looked upon; and all the glowing red blood had ebbed away from the brown cheeks.

She said in a low voice, "My father . . . Fridtjof . . ." then stopped to draw a long hard breath through her set teeth.

For the moment Sister Wynfreda was not a nun but a woman, — a woman with a great yearning tenderness that might have been a beautiful mother-love. She ran to the girl and caught her tremblingly by the hands, feeling up her arms to her shoulders and about her face, as if to make sure that she was really unharmed.

"Praise the Lord that you are delivered whole to me!" she breathed. "Gram told us — that they had taken you."

Gazing at her out of horror-filled eyes, Randalin stood quite still in her embrace. Her story came from her in jerks, and each fragment seemed to leave her breathless, though she spoke slowly.

"I broke away," she said. "They stood around me in a ring. Norman Leofwinesson said he would carry me before a priest and marry me, so that Avalcomb might be his lawfully, whichever king got the victory. I said by no means would I wed him; sooner

would I slay him. All thought that a great jest and laughed. While they were shouting I slipped between them and got up the stairs into a chamber, where I bolted the door and would not open to them, though they pounded their fists sore and cursed at me. After a while the pounding became an exertion to them, and one began to talk about the mead that was waiting below. And after that they whispered together for a space. At last they began to laugh and jeer, and called to me that they would go down and drink my wedding toast before they broke in the door and fetched me; and then they betook themselves to feasting."

Sister Wynfreda bent her head to murmur a prayer: "God forgive me if I have lacked charity in my judgment on the Pagans! If they who have seen the light can do such deeds, what can be expected of those who yet labor under the curse of darkness?"

"I do not understand you," Randalin said wearily, sinking on the grass and passing her hands over her strained eyes. "When a man looks with eyes of longing upon another man's property, it is to be expected that he will do as much evil as luck allows him. Though he has got Baddeby, Norman was covetous of Avalcomb. When his lord, Edric Jarl, was still King Edmund's man, he twice beset the castle, and my father twice held it against him. And his greed was such that he could not stay away even after Edric had become the man of Canute."

It was the nun's turn for bewilderment. "The man of Canute? Edric of Mercia, who is married to

the King's sister? It cannot be that you know what you say!"

"Certainly I know what I say," the girl returned a little impatiently. "All English lords are fraudulent; men can see that by the state of the country. Though he be thrice kinsman to the English King, Edric Jarl has joined the host of Canute of Denmark; and all his men have followed him. But even that agreement could not hold Norman back from Avalcomb. He lay hidden near the gate till he saw my father come, in the dusk, from hunting, when he fell upon him and slew him, and forced an entrance — the nithing! When he had five-and-fifty men and my father but twelve!"

She paused, with set lips and head flung high. The nun got down stiffly beside her and laid a gentle hand upon her knee.

"Think not of it, my daughter," she urged. "Think of your present need and of what it behooves us to do. Tell me how you escaped from the chamber, and why you wear these clothes."

"They were Fridtjof's." She spoke his name very softly. "I found them hanging on the chamber wall. In the night the men began to entertain themselves with singing, and it could be heard that they were getting drunk. It had been in my mind that I would stay where I was until they forced the door; then, because I would like it better to die than to marry any of them, I would throw myself out of the window, and the stones below would cause my death. But now it

came to me that if I could dress so that they would not notice me, there were many good chances that I might slip past them and get out through the postern. I waited till they were all still, and then I crept into the women's room, and found the bondmaids huddled in their beds. They got afraid at the sight of me, for they thought I was Fridtjof's ghost; and they dared not move. So I had to go down alone." She shuddered in spite of herself. "Never did I think that darkness could be so unpleasant, — when one is listening for sounds and fears to put out a hand lest it touch something alive! But I got past the door and through the guard-room, where the Englishmen were snoring so loud that they would not have heard if I had stamped. In a niche in the wall outside I found Almstein the steward hiding, full of fear. I made him follow me out of the postern and around to the gate where . . . my father . . . and . . . Fridtjof . . ." Her voice broke, but she struggled on. "The English dogs had left them there. . . . My father's face was . . . wounded . . . and the moon made his hair all silver round it, so that the blood looked to be black blots. . . . And Fridtjof's sword was in his hand. . . . Always he had wished to go into battle, though he was no more than fourteen winters old. . . . There was a smile on his lips. . . . I made Almstein dig two graves. He is a cowardly fellow, and it is likely that he would have left them there till the English were gone. I kissed Fridtjof's mouth, . . . and . . . and I laid . . . my father's cloak . . . over . . . over his . . . face."

It was useless trying to go on; a deep sob shut off her voice and threatened to rend her when she tried to hold it back. Sister Wynfreda strove with gentle arms to draw her down upon her breast.

"Suffer the tears to come, my daughter," she urged her tenderly, "or sooner or later they must."

Randalin pulled away almost roughly, dashing the drops from her eyes.

"They shall not!" she cried brokenly. "They shall not! Am I a weak-minded English woman that I should shed tears because my kin are murdered? I will shed blood to avenge them; that is befitting a Danish girl. I will not weep, — as though there were shame to wash out! They died with great glory, like warriors. I will fix it in my mind that I am a kinswoman of warriors. I will not weep."

The older woman shrank a little. To ears attuned to the silence of the grave, such an outburst was little less than terrifying; she was at a loss how to soothe the girl. To gain a respite, she stole away and renewed the wounded man's bandages.

After a moment Randalin rose and followed, buckling her cloak as she went.

"Since I am become this man's lord, I think it right for me to see how he fares before I leave him," she explained. Once more she spoke gently, though the fire of her pride had quite dried her tears.

"Before you leave him?" The form in the faded

robes turned inquiringly toward the erect young figure in its brave scarlet cloak. "What is it you say, my child?"

But Randalin was bending low over the green couch. "Do you know who I am?" she was asking urgently of the woodward. "Fix your eyes on me and try to gather together your wits."

Slowly the man's wandering gaze focussed itself; a silly laugh welled up in his throat.

"It would be no strange wonder if I did not," he chuckled. "Odin has changed you greatly; your face was never so beautiful. But this once you cannot trick me, Fridtjof Frodesson."

There came a time when this mistake was a source of some comfort to Randalin, Frode's daughter; but now she stirred impatiently.

"Look again, and try to command your tongue. Tell me the state of your feelings. Can you live?"

The man shook with his foolish laughter. "You cub! Will not even being killed cure you of your tricks? If you who have been in Valhalla do not know what Odin intends about my life, how can I know, who have stayed on earth?"

Sister Wynfreda's hand fell upon the girl's arm. "Disquiet yourself no further," she whispered. "It is useless and to no end. If it please the Lord to bless our labors, the wound will soon be healed. Come this way, where he cannot hear our voices, and tell me what moves you to speak of leaving. Is it not your intention to creep in with us?"

As she yielded reluctantly to the pressure, Randalin even showed surprise at the question. "By no means. My errand hither was only to ask for bread. I thought it unadvisable to venture into the castle kitchen, yet it is needful that I keep up my strength. I go direct to the Danish camp to get justice from King Canute."

The nun reached out and caught the gay cloak, gasping. "The Danish camp? You speak in a raving fit! Better you thrust yourself into a den of ravenous beasts. You know not what you say."

Offense stiffened the figure under the cloak. "It is you who do not know. Now, as always, you think about Canute what lying English mouths have told of him. I know him from my father's lips. No man on the Island is so true as he, or so generous to those who ask of him. Time and again have I heard my father bid Fridtjof to imitate him. He is the highest-minded man in the world." Her voice as she ended was a stone wall of defiance. Sister Wynfreda made a desperate dash down another road.

"My daughter, I entreat that you will not despise my offer. The yoke is not so heavy here. Here is no strict convent rule; how could there be? We are but a handful of feeble old women left living after those who led us are gone, to the end that heathen fog smother not utterly the light which once was so bright. In truth, most dear child, you would have no hard lot among us. A few hours' work in the garden, — surely that is a pleasure, watching the fair green things spring

and thrive under your care. And when the tenderness of the birds and the content of the little creeping creatures have filled your heart to bursting with a sense of God's goodness, to come and stand before the Holy Table and pour out your joys in sweet melody — "

But Randalin's head was shaking too decidedly, though she was not ungentle in her answering. "I give you thanks, Sister Wynfreda, but such a life is not for me. My nature is such that I do not like the gloomy songs you sing; nor do I care for green things, except to wear in my hair. And it seems to me that I should be spiritless and a coward if I should like such a life. I am no English girl, to tremble and hide under a mean kirtle. I am a Norse maiden, the kinswoman of warriors. I think I should not show much honor to my father and my brother were I to leave them unavenged and sit down here with you. No, I will go to my King and get justice. When he has slain the murderer and given me the castle again, I will come back; and you shall come and live with me, and eat meat instead of herbs, and — "

In her desperation, Sister Wynfreda caught her by the wrists and held her. "My daughter, my daughter, shake off this sleep of your wits, I entreat you! The men you are trusting in are dreams which you have dreamed in the safety of your father's arms. They among whom you are going are barbarians, — yea, devils! It were even better had you married the son of Leofwine. Think you I know nothing of the Pagans,

that you set my words at naught? Who but Danishmen laid low these walls, and slaughtered the holy nuns as lambs are torn by wild beasts? Have I not seen their horrid wickedness? You think a nun a coward? Know you how these scars came on my face? Three times, with my own hands, I pressed a red-hot iron there to destroy the beauty that allured, — else had the Pagans dragged me with them. Was I a coward?"

Randalin's eyes were very wide. "It seems to me that you were simple-minded," she breathed. "Why did you not thrust the iron in *his* face?"

But Sister Wynfreda's expression changed so strangely that the girl foresaw an attack along another line, and hastened to forestall it. "It is not worth while to tell me further about the matter. Do you not see that it is by no means the same? I shall be a Danish woman among Danish men. I shall not be a captive, to be made a drudge of and beaten. It is altogether different. I shall be with my own people, my own King. Let us end this talk. Give me the bread and let me go. The sun is getting high."

She glanced at it as she spoke, and found it so much higher than she had realized that her haste increased.

"No, I dare not wait for it. It is necessary that I get a good start, or they will overtake me. They are to join Canute near Scoerstan; I heard it talked among them. My horse is somewhat heavy in his movements, for he is the one Gram rode yesterday; I

found him grazing by the road. Let me go, Sister Wynfreda. Bid me farewell and let me go."

Clutching at her belt, her arm, her cloak, the nun strove desperately to detain her. "Randalin! Listen! Alas! how you grieve me by talking after this manner! Wait, you do not understand. It is not their cruelty I fear for you. Child, listen! It is not their blows —"

But Randalin had wrenched herself free. "Oh, fear, fear, fear!" she cried impatiently. "Fear your enemies; fear your friends; fear your shadow! Old women are afraid of everything! You will see when I come back. No, no, do not look at me like that; I do not mean to behave badly toward you, but it will become a great misfortune to me if I am hindered; it will, in truth. See now; I will kiss you — here — where your cheek is softest. I cannot allow you to take hold of my cloak again. There! Now lay your hand upon my head, as you do with the children when you wish them good luck."

Because there was nothing else to do, and because the thought of doing this gave her some comfort, Sister Wynfreda complied. Laying her trembling hands upon the bared black head, she raised her despairing face to heaven and prayed with all the earnestness that was hers. Then she stood at the gate in silence and watched the girl set forth. As Randalin turned into the sunny highway, she looked back with a brave smile and waved her cap at the faded figure under the arch. But the nun, left in the moss-grown

garden, wrapped in the peace of the grave, saw her through a blur of tears.

"God guard you, my fledgeling," she whispered over and over. "My prayers be as a wall around you. My love go with you as a warm hand in your loneliness. God keep you in safety, my most beloved daughter!"

CHAPTER III

WHERE WAR-DOGS KENNEL

Openly I now speak
Because I both sexes know:
Unstable are men's minds toward women;
'T is when we speak most fair,
When we most falsely think:
That deceives even the cautious.

HÁVAMÁL.

THIS morning there were but few travellers upon the Watling Street. South of the highway the land was held by English farmers, who would naturally remain under cover while a Danish host was in the neighborhood; while north of the great dividing line lay Danish freeholds whose masters might be equally likely to see the prudence of being in their watch-towers when the English allies were passing. Barred across by the shadows of its mighty trees, the great road stretched away mile after mile in cool emptiness. At rare intervals, a mounted messenger clattered over the stones, his hand upon his weapon, his eyes rolling sharply in a keen watch of the thicket on either side.

Still more rarely, foraging parties swept through the morning stillness, lowing cows pricked to a sharp trot before them, and squawking fowls slung over their broad shoulders. Captured pigs gave back squeal for squawk, and the voices of the riders rose in uproarious laughter until the very echoes revolted and cast back the hideous din.

The approach of the first of these bands caused Randalin's heart to leap and sink under her brave green tunic. For all that she could tell from their dress, they might as well be English as Danish. If her disguise should fail! As they bore down upon her, she drew her horse to the extreme edge of the road and turned upon them a pale defiant face.

On they came. When they caught sight of a sprig of a boy drawn up beside the way with his hand resting sternly on his knife, they sent up a shout of boisterous merriment. The blood roared so loudly in Randalin's ears that she could not understand what they said. She jerked her horse's head toward the trees and drove her spur deep into his side. Only as he leaped forward and they swept past her, shouting, did the words reach home.

"Look at the warrior, comrades!" "Hail, Berserker!" "Scamper, cub, or your nurse will catch you!" "Tie some of your hair on your chin, little one!"

As the sound of hoof-beats died away, and the nag settled back to his steady jog-trot, the girl unclenched her hands and drew a long breath.

"Though it seems a strange wonder that they should not know me for a woman, I think I need give myself no further uneasiness. It must be that I am very like Fridtjof in looks. It may be that it would not be unadvisable now for me to ask advice of the next person how I can come to the camp."

The asking had become a matter of necessity by the time she found anyone capable of answering the question. Three foreign merchants whom she overtook near noon could give her no information, and she covered the next five miles without seeing a living creature; then it was only a beggar, who crawled out of the bushes to offer to sell the child beside him for a crust of bread. The petition brought back to Randalin her own famished condition so sharply that her answer was unnecessarily petulant, and the man disappeared before the question could even be put to him. Two miles more, and nothing was in front of her but a flock of ragged blackbirds circling over a trampled wheat-field. Already the sun's round chin rested on the crest of the farthest hill. In desperation, she turned aside and galloped after a mailed horseman who was trotting down a clover-sweet lane with a rattle and clank that frightened the robins from the hedges. He reined in with a guffaw when he saw what mettle of blade it was that had accosted him.

"Is it your intention to join the army?" he inquired. "Canute will consider himself in great luck."

"I am desirous to — to tell him something," Red Cloak faltered.

His grin vanishing, the man leaned forward alertly. "Is it war news? Of Edric Jarl's men?"

Before her tongue could move, Randalin's surprised face had answered. The warrior smote his thigh resoundingly.

"You will be able to tell us tidings we wish to know. Since the fight this morning we have been allowed to do no more than growl at the English dogs across the plain, because it was held unadvisable to make an onset until the Jarl's men should increase our strength. It is to be hoped they are not far behind?"

"You make a mistake," Randalin began hesitatingly. "My news does not concern the doings of Edric Jarl, but the actions of his man Norman —"

A blow across her lips silenced her.

"Hold your tongue until you come in to the Chief," the man admonished her, with good-humored severity. "Have you not learned that babbling turns to ill, you sprouting twig? And waste no more time upon the road, either. Yonder is your shortest way, — up that lane between the barley. When you come to a burned barn, do you turn to the left and ride straight toward the woods; it should happen that an old beech stock stands where you come out. Take then the path that winds up-hill, and it will bring you to the war booths before you can open your foolish mouth thrice. Trolls! what a cub to send a message by! But get along, now; you will suffer from their temper if they think it likely that you have kept them waiting." He

gave the horse a stinging slap upon the flank, that sent him forward like a shaft from a bow.

Snatching up her slackened rein with one hand, his rider managed to secure her leaping cap with the other; and after the first bounce, she caught the jerky gait instinctively and swayed her body into its uneven swing. But her heart was all at once a-throb in a wild panic. Was this what a boy must expect? This challenging brutal downrightness, which made one seem to have become a dog that must prove his usefulness or be kicked aside? Her spirit felt as bruised as a fledgeling fallen upon stony ground. She shivered as the old beech stock loomed up before her.

"If these other men behave so, it is in my mind to tell them that I am a woman," she decided. "Since they are my own people, no evil can come of their knowing; and I dislike the other feeling."

The recollection that she had always this escape open gave her a new lease of boldness. Her courage rose as fast as her body when they began to climb the hillside toward the ruddy light that slanted down between the tree-trunks. When a sentinel stopped her near the top, she faced him with a fairly firm front.

"I have war news for King Canute," she told him haughtily; and he let her pass with no more than a grin.

The camp appeared to be strung through the whole beech grove that covered the crest of the hill. The first sign of it began less than ten yards beyond the sentry, where a couple of squatting thralls were

skinning a slain deer; and as far as eye could swim in the flood of sunset light, the green aisles were dotted with scattered groups. Every flat rock had a ring of dice-throwers bending over it; every fallen trunk its row of idlers. Wherever a cluster of boulders made a passable smithy, crowds of sweating giants plied hammer and sharpening-stone. The edges of the little stream that trickled down to the valley were thronged with men bathing gaping wounds and tearing up the cool moss to staunch their flowing blood. Never had the girl dreamed of such chaos. It gave her the feeling of having plunged into a whirlpool. She threaded her way among the groups as silently as the leaf-padded ground would permit.

She had come in by the back door, but now she began to reach the better quarters. Her nose reported sooner than her eyes that a meal was in making; and a glow of anticipation braced her famished body. Here, in this green alcove, preparations were just beginning; a white-robed slave knelt by the curling thread of smoke and nursed the flickering flame with his breath, while his circle of hungry masters pelted him with woolly beech-nuts and cursed his slowness. There, a dozen yards to the left, the meal was nearly over; between the gnarled trunks the fire shone like a red eye; and bursts of merriment and snatches of boisterous song marked the beginning of the drinking.

Sometimes a woman's lighter laughter would mingle with the peal. Sometimes, through the swaying branches, Randalin caught sight of the flower-fair

face of an English girl, bending between the shaggy yellow heads of the captors. Once she came upon a brawny Viking employing his huge fingers to twine a golden chain around a white throat. The girl's face was dimpling bewitchingly as she held aside her shining hair. Randalin had an impulse of triumph.

"I wish that Sister Wynfreda could see that, now, since it is her belief that Danes are always overbearing toward their captives," she told herself. "This one has no appearance of having felt blows or known hard labor. She could not have been entertained with greater liberality in her father's house —"

She broke off suddenly, as the words suggested a new train of thought. This girl must have been driven from her father's house by Danes, even as she herself had been driven forth by the English. Yet here was she eating with her foes, taking gold from their hands! Could she have honor who would thus make friends with the slayers of her kin? Randalin watched her wonderingly until leaves shut out the picture.

Another sentinel hailed her, and she gave him absently her customary answer. He pointed to a great striped tent of red and white linen, adorned with fluttering streamers and guarded by more sentries in shining mail; and she rode toward it in a daze.

More revellers sprawled under these trees, and she looked at them curiously. The women here did not seem to be amusing themselves so well. One was weeping; and one — a slip of a girl with a face like a rose — was trying vainly to rise from her place beside

a drunken warrior, who held her hands and strove to pull her lips down to his wine-stained mouth. In imagination Randalin felt again Norman's arm around her waist, and a wild pity was quickened in her. This was worse than drudgery, worse than blows! For the credit of Danish warriors, it was well that Sister Wynfreda could not see this.

Again her own words raised a startling apparition. What had been the Sister's last cry of warning? "It is not their cruelty I fear for you. Child, listen! It is not their blows —" Could it be possible that *this* was what —

Like a merciless answer came a scream from the girl, — a short piercing cry of horror and loathing and agonized appeal as she was drawn down upon the leering face. At that cry, childhood's blind trust died forever in Randalin. As she rode past the pair, with clenched hands and flashing eyes, she knew without reasoning that tortures would not tear from her the secret of her disguise.

When the sentinel before the tent challenged her roughly, it was her tongue, not her brain, that answered him.

"I have war news for the King."

In a twinkling he had dropped his spear, plucked her from her saddle, and was marching her toward the entrance by her collar.

"In the Troll's name, get in to the Chief, and let nothing hinder you!" he growled. "From your snail's pace I got the idea that you had come a-begging. Get

in, and set your tongue wagging as speedily as you can! Why do you draw back? I tell you to make haste!"

Before she could so much as catch her breath, he had raised the tent-flap, pushed her bodily through the entrance, and dropped the linen door behind her.

CHAPTER IV

WHEN ROYAL BLOOD IS YOUNG BLOOD

The mind only knows
What lies near the heart;
That alone is conscious of our affections.
No disease is worse
To a sensible man
Than not to be content with himself.

HÁVAMÁL.

THREE richly dressed warriors, clinking golden goblets across a table,—so much Randalin caught in her first glance. On the spot where the sentinel had released her she stopped, stock-still, and with eyes bent on the ground tremblingly awaited the royal attention.

Clink-clank, — the golden goblet lips continued their noisy kissing. The hum of the low-toned voices droned on without interruption. Minute after minute dragged by. She ventured to shift her weight and steal an upward glance.

Her first thought was that a king's tent was very like a trader's booth. Spears and banners and gold-

bossed shields decorated the walls, while the reed-strewn ground was littered with furs and armor, with jewelled altar-cloths and embroidered palls and wonderful gold-laced garments. The rude temporary benches were spread with splendid covers of purple and green, upon which silver lilies and gold-eyed peacocks had been wrought with exquisite skill. And the rough-hewn table bore such treasures as plunderers dream of when their sleeping-bags are lying the most comfortably, — ivory relique caskets, out of which the sacred bones had been unceremoniously turned, gemmed chalices from earls' feasting-halls, and amber chains and silver mirrors and strings of pearls from their ladies' bowers. Randalin's gaze lingered, dazzled, then slowly rose to examine the master of all this wealth.

He was not so easy to pick out. Of the three men around the table, only one was a graybeard; and of the two striplings left, either might have been the son of Sven of Denmark. Both were finely formed; both were dressed with royal splendor, and the hair of each fell from under a jewelled circlet in uncut lengths of shining fairness. The hair of the shorter one, though, was finer; and no red tainted the purity of its gold. When one came to look at it, it was like a royal cloak. Perhaps he might be the King! She wished he would raise his face from his hands, that she might see it. Then she noticed that his shoulders lacked the breadth of his companion's by as much as a palm's width; and her mind wavered. Surely so great a king as Canute

must be broader-shouldered than any of his subjects! This youth was hardly brawny at all; as Vikings went, he was even slender. She turned her attention to the other man. He was big enough, certainly; the fist that he was waving in the air was like nothing so much as a sledge-hammer, and there was a likeness to the Jotuns in his florid coarse-featured face.

As she watched it, Randalin felt a coldness creep over her. His great jaws were like the jowl of a mastiff. His thick-lipped mouth — what was it that made that so terrible, even in smiling? Watching it with the fascination of terror, it occurred to her to endow him with the appetite of the drunken warrior at the table outside the tent. Suppose, just as they stood now, he should take the fancy to turn and kiss her lips; would anything stop him? In the drawing of a breath, her overwrought nerves had painted the picture so clearly that she was sick with horror. Sister Wynfreda's red-hot iron would not keep him back, instinct told her. That sacrifice of beauty had not been simple-minded; it had been the one alternative. The girl's light-hearted boldness went from her in a gasp. Her shaking limbs gave way beneath her, so that she sank on the nearest bench and cowered there, panting.

Though the men were too intent to notice her, in some sub-conscious way her moving seemed to rouse them. Their discussion had been growing gradually louder; now the bearded man and the young Jotun rose suddenly and faced their companion, whose voice became audible in an obstinate mutter, —

"Nevertheless, I doubt that it was wise to join hands with an English traitor."

The older man said in a tone of slowly gathering anger, "I told you to make the bargain, and I stand at the back of my counsels. Have you become like the wind, which tries every quarter of the sky because it knows not its own mind?"

While the young man warned in his heavy voice, "You will have your will in this as in everything, King Canute; but I tell you that if you keep the bargain, you will act against my advice."

Randalin had been mistaken in her deductions. It was not the brawny body that was King of the Danes; the leader's spirit lodged in the slender frame of the youth with the cloak of yellow hair.

He raised from his hands now a face of boyish sullenness, and sat glaring over his clenched fists at his counsellors.

"Certainly it would become a great misfortune to me if I should act against the advice of Rothgar Lodbroksson," he made stinging answer. "He is as wise and long-sighted as though he had eaten a dragon's heart. It was he who gave me the advice, when the English broke faith, to vent my rage upon the hostages. Men have not yet ceased to lift their noses at me for the unkingliness of the deed." His eyes blazed at the memory. They were not pleasant eyes when he was angry; the blue seemed to fade from them until they were two shining colorless pools in his brown face.

The son of Lodbrok shrugged his huge shoulders in stolid resignation; but the wrinkled forehead of the older man became somewhat smoother. There was nothing Jotun-like about his long, lean features, yet his expression was little pleasanter on that account. From under his lowering shaggy brows he appeared to see without being seen; and one distrusted his hidden eyes as a traveller in the open distrusts a skulker in the thicket.

He said in his measured voice, "In that matter my opinion stands with Canute. When bloodshed is unnecessary, it becomes a drawback. Craft is greatly to be preferred. One does not cross deep snow by stamping through it on iron-shod feet; one slides over it on skees."

Over the brown fists, the fierce bright eyes bent themselves upon him in his turn. The biting young voice said, "It is likely that Thorkel the Tall speaks from experience. It stands in my memory how well craft served him when he had deserted my father for Ethelred and then became tired of the Englishman. To procure himself peace, he was forced to creep back to my feet like a dog that has been kicked. Was there gold enough in his bribe to regild his fame?"

The gnarled old face of Thorkel the Tall grew livid; growling in his grizzled beard, his hand moved instinctively toward his sword. But Rothgar caught his arm with a boisterous laugh.

"Slowly, old wolf!" he admonished. "Never snarl at the snapping of the cub you have raised."

The King had not moved at the threatening gesture, and he did not move now, but he echoed the laugh bitterly.

"In that, you say more truth than you know, foster-brother. He is a wolf, and I am a wolf's cub, and you are no better. We are all a pack of ravening beasts, we Northmen, that have no higher ambition than to claw and use our teeth. Talk of high-mindedness to such — bah!" He flung his arms apart in loathing; then, in a motion as boyishly weary as it was boyishly petulant, crossed them on the table before him and pillowed his head upon them.

His companions did not seem to be unused to such outbursts. Rothgar appeared to find it more amusing than anything else, for his mouth expanded slowly in a grin. A snort of impatience distended the nostrils of Thorkel the Tall.

"At such times as these," he said, "are brought to my mind the words of Ulf Jarl, that a man does not really stand well upon his legs until he has lived twenty-five winters."

Up came the young King's yellow head. There was no question now about his temper. A spot of fiery red marked each cheek-bone, and his colorless eyes were points of blazing light.

"Better is it to stand unsteadily upon two legs than to go naturally upon four," he retorted. "If I also am a beast, at least there is a man's mind in me that tells me to loathe myself for being so. Even as I loathe you — both of you — and all your howling

pack! Make me no answer or, by the head of Odin, you shall feel my fangs! You say that my will is like the wind's will. Can you not see why, dull brutes that you are? Because it is not my will, but yours, — now Rothgar's beast-fierceness, now your low-minded craft. Because I am not content with myself, I listen to you. And you — you — Oh, leave me, leave me, before I lose my human nature and go mad like a dog! Leave — You laugh!" As he caught sight of Rothgar, he interrupted himself with a roar. His hand shot to his belt and plucking forth the jewelled knife that hung there, hurled it, a glittering streak, at the grinning face. If it had reached home, one of Rothgar's eyes would have gone out in darkness.

But the son of Lodbrok had known his royal foster-brother too long to be taken by surprise. Throwing up a wooden platter like a shield, he caught the quivering blade in its bottom, whence he drew it forth with good-humored composure.

"If you wish to give a friend a present, King, you should not throw it at him so angrily," he suggested. "Had you given me the sheath too, your gift would have been doubly dear."

The fiery spots in Canute's cheeks deepened and spread. He turned away without answering, and stood a long time beating his fingers on the table in a sharp tattoo.

What does it mean, the pause that follows the storm, when Nature's accumulated discontent has vented itself in a passionate outbreak? The trees

stand motionless, with hanging heads; the blue of the clearing sky is divinely tender; under the spangling drops, the flowers look up like tear-filled eyes. Does it mean repentance, or only exhaustion?

Gradually the color flowed back to the young King's eyes and softened them; gradually his mouth relaxed from its fierce lines and drooped in bitter curves. When at last his fingers stopped their nervous beat, it was to unfasten the sheath of chased gold which was attached to his waist, and stretch it out to Rothgar.

"Have it your own way," he said gravely. "It is right that I pay some fine; I have a troll's temper. Take the sheath. But do not make the mistake again of laughing at me because you cannot understand me. But one person may do that and live; and that person is a woman, and my wife. . . . There is a strange feeling in my heart that we have begun to travel different paths, you and I, — and that it is because we no longer walk on the same level of ground, that we no longer see any object in the same light. . . . And my mind tells me that in time to come your path will lead you down into the valley, . . . and my road will take me up the mountain-side, . . . until even our voices shall no longer reach across." He came out of his dreaming abruptly. "It is not worth while to speak further. I do not blame my foster-father that he is lifting the corner of his mouth at me. And you — you think I am talking in my sleep. Leave me, as I ordered you. There is no unfriendliness in my mind at this, but I can command myself no further. Go."

Rothgar said, with some approach to formal courtesy, "I ask you to pardon it that I have done what you dislike, for I wish that the least of all the world. And I give you thanks for your gift." Their hands clasped strongly as the trinket passed from grasp to grasp.

Then the sage and the soldier turned and strode past the cowering figure of Randalin and out of the linen doorway.

CHAPTER V

BEFORE THE KING

Know if thou hast a friend
Whom thou little trustest
Yet wouldst good from him derive
Thou shouldst speak him fair,
But think craftily,
And leasing pay with lying.

HÁVAMÁL.

HEN the curtain had fallen behind his advisers, the young King threw himself back upon his rude high-seat and rested motionless among its cushions, his head hanging heavily upon his breast.

Crouching on her bench near the door, Randalin watched him as a fly caught in a web watches the approaching spider. She had forgotten her errand; she had forgotten her disguise; she had forgotten where she was; her one conscious emotion was fear. Her eyes followed his roving glance from spear to banner, from floor to ceiling, in terrible anticipation. It ap-

proached her; it turned aside; it passed above her, hesitated, sank, touched her! Ashen-white, she staggered to her feet and faced him.

A lithe boyish figure with wide boyish eyes and a tanned boyish face, — Canute gazed incredulously; rubbed his eyes and looked again.

"In the Troll's name, who are you?" he ejaculated. "How came you here?"

The pale lips moved, but no sound came from them.

Their fruitless twitching seemed to irritate him. He made a petulant gesture toward the half-filled goblet. "Why do you stand there making mouths? Drink that and get a man's voice into your throat, if you have anything to say to me."

"A man's voice!" The girl stared at him. "A *man's* voice?" Then, like lungfuls of fresh air, it entered into her that she was not really the naked fledgeling she felt herself. She was in the toils, surely, but there was a shell around her. Glad to hide her face for a moment, she seized the goblet and drained it slowly to the last drop. If only she could remember just how Fridtjof had borne himself! As she swallowed the last mouthful, a recollection came to her of the thrall-women grumbling over Fridtjof's wine-stained tunics; and she carefully drew her sleeve across her mouth as she set down the cup.

Leaning back in his seat, the King took frowning measure of his guest, from the toe of her spurred riding-boot to the top of the green cap which she had forgot-

ten to remove. His mood seemed wavering between annoyance and amusement; a word could decide the balance. With her last swallow he repeated his challenge.

"Are you capable now of giving me any reason why I should not have you flogged from the camp? Is it your opinion that because I choose to behave foolishly before my friends, I am desirous to have tale-bearing boys listening?"

"Boys" again! Randalin's sinking spirit rallied at the assurance as her fainting body had revived under the rich warmth of the mead.

She managed to stammer out, "I entreat you not to be angry, Lord King. It was the fault of the man on guard that I came in as I did. And I did not understand six of the words you spoke, — I beseech you to believe it."

That she had in truth been too frightened for intelligent eavesdropping, the remaining pallor of her face made it easy to believe. The scales tipped ever so little.

"Did you think you had fallen into a bear pit?" the King asked with a faint smile, that sharpened swiftly to bitterness. "After all, it would matter little what anyone told of me. Without doubt your kin have already taught you to call me thrall-bred and witless. Little more can be said."

That from the warrior whose foot was already planted on the neck of England! In her surprise, Randalin's eyes met his squarely. "By no means,

King Canute; my father called you the highest-minded man in the world."

The young leader flushed scarlet, flushed till he felt the burning, and averted his face to hide it. He said in a low voice, "Many things have been told of me that I count for naught, but this — this has not been said of me before. Tell me his name."

"He was called Frode, the Dane of Avalcomb." The red mouth trembled a little. "He is dead now. He was slain last night, by Norman Leofwinesson, who is Edric Jarl's thane."

As both horseman and sentinel had started at that name, so now the King straightened into alertness, forgetting everything else.

"Leofwinesson? What know you of him or his Jarl? Where are they? When saw you them?"

"Last night; when they lay drunk in my father's castle at Avalcomb, after —"

"Avalcomb? Near St. Alban's? The swine!" The monarch was a soldier now, shooting his questions like arrows. "After I bade them at Gillingham come straight to me! How many were they? Where is the Jarl?"

"He was not with them. It was Norman of Baddeby who led, and he had no more than five-and-fifty men. It was spoken among them that they would join you at sunset to-day —"

Canute's hand shot out and gripped her arm and shook it. "You know this for certain? I will have

your tongue if you lie to me! You are sure that they intend coming, — that it is not their intention to play me false and return to Edmund?" His voice was stern, his gaze mercilessly direct. An hour before, the girl would have shrunk from them both.

One can learn life-lessons in an hour. She faced the roughness now as one faces a rush of bracing north wind. "I know what I heard them say, Lord King. They said that Edric Jarl had marched on to St. Alban's to lie there over-night. Leofwinesson stopped at Avalcomb because he wished to vent his spite upon my father. It was their intention to meet at the city gate at noon and come on to join you. They will be here before the sun is set."

Canute released her arm to reach for his goblet. "I wish I could know it for certain," he muttered. "But it is as the saying has it, 'Though they fight and quarrel among themselves, the eagles will mate again.'" He looked at her with a half-smile as he refilled his cup, motioning toward the other flagon. "Fill up, and we will drink a toast to their loyalty and to your beard; they appear to be equally in need of encouragement." Draining it off, he sat staring down into the dregs, twirling the stem thoughtfully between his fingers.

By the time she had shifted her weight twice for each foot, the petitioner ventured to recall him.

"It gives me some hope, to hear what you say about suspecting Edric Jarl," she said timidly; "for

that makes it appear more likely that you will be willing to give me justice on his man."

"Justice?" The King's mind came back to her slowly, as from an immense distance. "By Thor, I had forgotten! There have not been so many to me on that errand. . . . Though I take it well that you should trust me. . . . Yes, certainly; I will be kinglike once. Stand here before me, while I question you."

She caught her breath rather sharply as she stepped forward. Would she be able to tell a straight story? She stood with fingers interlacing nervously.

"Tell me first how you are called?"

"I am called Fridtjof Frodesson."

"Frode of Avalcomb! Now I know where I have heard that name; my father spoke it often, and always with great respect. It will go hard with me if I must return an unfavorable answer to his son. Tell me how his death was brought about."

Randalin thrust the sobs back from her throat; the tears back from her eyes. Only a clear head could deliver her out of the snare. She began slowly: "Leofwinesson set upon him last night, at the gate of the castle, and slew him. The Englishman had long been covetous of Avalcomb, so that even his fear of you was not so great as his greed. He had five-and-fifty men, and my father but twelve — besides me; he — we — had just come in from hunting. Then he rode over my father's body into the castle." She stopped uncertainly to glance at her listener.

The brightness of his eyes startled her, though they were not turned in her direction. They were blazing down into the cup that he was turning and pinching between his fingers. He said, half as though to himself: "Vermin! What would I give if I might take them in my teeth and shake them like the filth-fed rats they are! Ten hundred such do not reach the value of one finger of a warrior like Frode! I knew that the fetters of Thorkel's craftiness would pinch me somewhere—" He broke off and flung the goblet from him, burying his hands in his yellow hair. "How I hate them!" he breathed between his teeth. "How I hate their smooth-tongued Jarl, and all their treacherous hides! Oh, for the day when I no longer need their aid; when I am free to strike!" The joy of his face was a terrible thing to hold in one's memory.

Perhaps he saw its awfulness reflected in the wide blue eyes, for he checked himself abruptly. When he spoke again, he had himself well in hand.

"I act like a fool to let you hear my ravings. Poor cub! it is likely you will call me a worse name when you find out how I am hindered! Yet go on and tell me the rest. How comes it that you escaped unharmed?"

With Gram's experience to follow, it was not hard to frame that answer. "They knocked me on the head with a spear-butt and left me for dead. When I got my senses again, I found my way to the nuns of St. Mildred's; and they gave me food, and I rode hither."

"It is the Troll's luck! I—yet, go on. The day

will come! Did they further harm within the castle? Have you women-kin?"

Randalin hesitated. Would it not be safer if she could deny altogether the existence of a daughter of Frode? But no, that was not possible, in the face of what Norman might reveal. She began very, very carefully: "It happened that my mother died before we came to Avalcomb; and my father had but one daughter. She was called Randalin. I did not see what became of her, for I was outside; but I think that she is dead. A — her thrall-woman told me that Leofwinesson pursued her to a chamber in the wall. And — and because she could not escape from him — she — she threw herself from the window, and the stones below caused her death."

The King's hands clenched convulsively. "It is like them!" he muttered. "It has happened as I supposed. If the master be like his men, I ask you in what their God is to be preferred to ours? Have no fear but that I will avenge your kinswoman. Those of her own blood-ties could do no more. And Frode also. You need not wait long for me when the day comes; the last hair of the otter-skin shall be covered, though I take from them the Ring itself. You shall see! Have patience, and you shall see!"

Upon burning ears the word "patience" falls coldly.

"Patience!" the child of Frode repeated.

Perhaps in days gone by the young King himself had rebelled at the tyranny of that word. Perhaps the

smart of its scourge was still upon him. He put forth a kindly hand and drew the boy down beside him.

"Listen, young one," he said, "and do not blame me for what I cannot help. Had I come hither only to get property and go away again, as Northmen before me have come, it would not matter to me whom I killed, and I would slay Leofwinesson more gladly than I would eat; may the Giant take me if I lie! But I have come to the Island to set up my seat-pillars and get myself land. I think no one guesses how much I have the ambition at heart; even to me it appears a strange wonder. But it is true that I look upon the fair rolling meadows with such eyes of love that when it is necessary that I should set fire to them, it is as though I had laid the torch to my hair. And because of that, in order that I be not kept destroying them until they are not worth the having, I have made a bargain with Edric Jarl, who is dissatisfied with his king, that we are to support each other in the game. There it is all open to you. Leofwinesson is the man of Edric. Until such time as I get the kingship firmly in my hands, it would be unadvisable for me to reckon with him though he had slain my foster-brother. You see? It is the way the Fates order things. I must submit to them, though I am a king. Can you not, then, bend your head without shame, and wait with me?"

Reasoning was lost on Randalin. The bitterness of failure had swept over her and maddened her. Was she mistaken, then, about everything? Could those

trembling old women behind the broken wall read the world like witches? Was everyone false or a beast? Oh, how her father had been wronged! She shook off the King's hand and faced him with blazing eyes, seeking for words that should bite like her thoughts. Then she became conscious that a word would precipitate a flood of hysterical tears, to the eternal disgrace of her warrior kin. All that was left for her was to get away without speaking. Out in the woods there would be no one to see; and the grass would hide the quivering of her lips. She put up her hand now to hide it and, struggling to her feet, began groping toward the door.

She did not stop when Canute's voice called after her, — not until she had reached the entrance, and the rattle of crossing spears, without, had told her that her way was barred. Then she whirled back with a sharp cry.

"Let me go! I hate you! Let me go!"

He did not bid his guards kill her, as she half expected. Instead, he said patiently, "I foresaw that you would take it ill; there is the greatest excuse for you. In your place I should be equally unruly. Indeed, there is a likeness about our luck, which causes my heart to go out to you as it has done to no one else. I will grant your boon in time to come; so sure as I live, I will. And until then, since all your stock has been cut off, I will be your guardian and you shall be my ward, as though you were my own brother. Come, sit here, and I will tell you."

She repulsed him sharply. "No, no, you shall do nothing for me! I am going back. I ask you to let me go."

"Let you go, to starve under a hedge?"

"I shall not starve; Avalcomb is mine."

"What food will that put in your mouth, since Leofwinesson has conquered it and driven out your servants and set his own in their place?"

Her heart sickened within her. Once more the impulse came to creep away, like a wounded animal, and fight it out alone. She turned again to the door.

"I will starve, then. Let me go."

Leaning at his ease in the great chair, the young King regarded his ward thoughtfully.

"It is not possible that the son of Frode the Fearless should be a coward," he said at last; "but you are over-peevish, boy. That you have never known government is easily seen. Listen now to the truth of the matter. If you were a maiden, it would be easy for me to — Are you listening?" He paused, for the slim figure had suddenly become so statue-like that he suspected it of plotting another attack upon the door.

The boy answered very low, "Yes, Lord King, I am listening."

Canute went on again: "I say that if you were a maiden, — if you were your sister, to tell it shortly, — I could easily dispose of you in marriage. Thus would you get protection, and your father's castle would gain a strong arm to fight for it. I would wed you to my foster-brother, Rothgar Lodbroksson, and thus bring

good to both of — Are you finding fault with that also?"

But the lad stood before him like a stone. If a faint cry had come from him, it was not repeated; and there was nothing offensive about a hidden face and shaking limbs.

The King continued more gently: "But since you were so simple as to be born a boy, such good luck is not to be expected. It is the best that I can do to offer you to become my ward and follow me as my page, until the sword's game has decided between me and Edmund of England. But I do not know where your ambition is if that does not content you. There are lads in Denmark who would give their tongues for the chance. What say you, Fridtjof the Bold?"

For a time it looked as if "Fridtjof the Bold" did not know what to say. He stood without raising his hanging head or moving a muscle. Silence filled the tent, while from outside leaked in the noise of the revel. Then, through that noise or above it, there became audible the notes of far-away horns. Edric Jarl was fulfilling his pledge. Cheers answered the blast. An exclamation broke from the King's lips, and he leaped up. At that moment, "Fridtjof the Bold" fell at his feet with clasped hands and supplicating eyes.

"Let me go, Lord King," he besought passionately. "Let me go, and I will ask nothing further of you. I will never trouble you again. Let me go! — only let me go!"

Canute of Denmark is not to be blamed that he stamped with exhausted patience.

"Go into the hands of the Trolls!" he swore. And again, "In the Fiend's name!" And at last, "By the head of Odin, it would serve you well did I take you at your word! It would serve you right did I turn you out to starve. Were it not for your father's sake, and for the sake of my own honor, I vow I would! Now hearken to this." Bending, he picked the boy up by his collar and shook him. "Listen now to this, and understand that you cannot move me by the breadth of a hair. I shall not let you go, and you shall be my ward, whether you will or no. And if you run away, soldiers shall go after you and bring you back, as often as you run. And if you answer me now or anger me further — but I will not say that, for it is your misfortune that makes you unruly, and you are weak-spirited from hunger. Take this bread now for your meal, and that bench yonder for your bed, and trouble me no more to-night. I would not be hard upon you, yet it would be advisable for you to remember that I have sufficient temper for one tent. Go as I bid you. I must meet with the Jarl. Go! Do you heed my orders?"

Only one answer was possible. After a moment the page gave it in a low voice.

"Yes, Lord King," he whispered, and crept away to his corner.

CHAPTER VI

THE TRAINING OF FRIDTJOF THE PAGE

A foolish man
Is all night awake,
Pondering over everything;
He then grows tired,
And when morning comes
All is lament, as before.

HÁVAMÁL.

HO that has youth and a healthy body is not made a new being by a night of dreamless slumber? What young heart is so despairing that to waken into a fair day does not bring courage? Wakened by the sun's caress, to the morning song of blowing trees, Randalin faced her future as became the kinswoman of warriors.

"I do not know why it was that fear crept into my breast last night," she told herself severely, when the first wave of strangeness and grief had broken over her, and she had come up again into the sparkling air. "Great dangers have threatened me, but I have escaped

them all with great luck; it is poor-spirited of me to despair. And it must be that witches had thinned my blood with water that I should have thought of running away. To do that would be to lose my revenge forever. I should become a creature without honor, like the girl with the necklace. To stay is no less than my duty. If I think all the time of Fridtjof, it is certain that I can hide it that I am a girl." Turning in her furry bed, she rose cautiously upon her elbow and looked about.

The tent was empty, though scattered furs along the benches showed where sleepers might have rested. But from outside, a clatter of hurrying feet and excited voices broke suddenly upon her. Did it mean a battle? She sat up, straining eye and ear. The jubilant voices shouted greetings that just missed being intelligible. The sun, glancing from moving weapons, flashed through the doorway in fantastic shapes.

While she was trying to unravel it all, one pair of the hurrying feet halted before the entrance. After a muttered word with the sentinel, they came on and brought the son of Lodbrok into view.

The girl started up with a gasp of alarm, then made the strange discovery that she was no longer afraid of him. Though he showed against the linen wall as brawny and big of jowl as he had loomed up the night before, she found herself moved only to dislike. What had been the matter last night? Understanding nothing of the clairvoyant power of sharp-

ened nerves, she set it down to cowardice, and put on an extra swagger now as her eyes met his.

Rothgar surveyed the sprig of defiance with no more than a perfunctory interest. "It seems that you are the son of Frode the Dane," he said in his heavy voice. "Frode was a mighty raven-feeder; for his sake I am going to support you until you can go well on your legs. Have you had anything to eat?"

As she shook her head, Randalin's heart rather softened toward him. But it hardened again when the thralls had brought the food, and he had sat down and begun to share it. Seen in a strong light, his rich tunic proved to be foul with beer stains, while his great hands reeked with grease. His thick lips, his heavy breathing — bah, he was revolting! Before she had finished the meal, she had come to the conclusion that she hated him.

Perhaps it was as well that there was something to add firmness to her bearing. As he swallowed his last mouthful of food, Rothgar said abruptly, "Canute has put your training into my hands. It is his will that I find out how much skill you have with weapons."

It was nothing more than she should have expected, yet it came upon her with the suddenness of a blow. She could only stammer, "Weapons?"

The Jotun's voice rumbled hideously as he talked into his goblet. "Have you the accomplishment to wield a battle-axe or throw a spear? Can you shoot straight?"

"No," she faltered.

He rolled his eyes around at her as he threw back his head to catch the last drop that clung to the golden rim. "Can you handle a sword?"

Randalin hesitated, uncertain how far her idle play at fencing with her brother would bear her out; she provided as many loop-holes as she could devise. "I think you will find my skill slight. I have — I have grown so fast that I lack strength in my arms. And I have not exercised myself as much as I should have done."

"It is in my mind that you have been a lazy cub," the warrior pronounced deliberate sentence, as he set down his goblet. "It is easily seen that Frode has been over-gentle with you. But you will pay now for your laziness, by receiving a cut each time I pass your guard. Stand forth, and show what your skill is worth. This sword will not be too heavy." Selecting the smallest of the jewelled blades upon the floor, he thrust it into her hands.

It is good to have in one's veins the liquid fire of the North, blood to which the presence of peril is like the touch of the Ice King to water. At the first clash of the blades, strange tingling fires began to flash through Randalin, — and then a hardness, that burnt while it froze. The first pass, her hands had parried seemingly by their own instinct; now she flung back her tumbling curls and proceeded to give those hands the aid of her eyes. They were marvellously quick eyes; for Fridtjof's thrusts, consulting no rule but his own will, had required lightning to follow them and

something like mind-reading to anticipate them. Three times her blade met Rothgar's squarely, and deftly turned it aside. The big warrior gave a grunt of approval and tried a more complicated pass. Her backward leap, the sudden doubling of her body, and the excited clawing of her free hand, were not graceful swordsmanship, certainly, but her steel was in the right place. The next instant, she even drew a little clink from one of the Jotun's silver buttons.

As she was recovering herself, she felt something like a pin prick her wrist; and she wondered vaguely what brooch had become unfastened. But she gave it scant attention for the big blade was threatening her from a new direction. She leaped to meet it, and for the next minute was kept turning, twisting, dodging, till her breath began to come in gasps, and her exhausted hand to relax its hold. Her weapon was almost falling from it by the time the son of Lodbrok lowered his point. Imitating him, she stood leaning on her sword, making futile gasps after her lost breath.

A grin slowly wrinkled his face as he watched her. "It appears that one who is no bigger around than a willow twig may be capable of a berserk rage," he said. "Do you not feel it that you are wounded?"

Following his eyes down to her hand, she found blood trickling from her sleeve. Oh, and pain! Now that she had wakened to it — pain! pricking, stinging, stabbing. Dropping her sword, she caught at her wrist.

"How did it happen? I thought a pin had pricked me!"

Roaring with laughter, he caught her under the arms and tossed her in the air.

"A pin!" he shouted. "A pin! That is Frode himself! A beard on your chin, and you also will be a feeder of wolves! For that you shall have a share in the battle. I swear it by the hilt of the Hanger!"

For the moment, the girl forgot her wound and hung limp in the great hands. "The battle?" she gasped. "I — I fight?"

Roaring afresh, the Jotun gave her another jubilant toss. "You blustering field-mouse! Showing your teeth already? Who knows? If you meet a blind Englishman without a weapon, you may even kill him. Here," he tumbled her roughly to the ground, "tie up your pin-scratch and then come after me. I must go up yonder to Canute, under the oak tree. If you are too tired to wield the sword, tie your hand to the hilt, and no man shall have a better will to do harm to the English. Frode the Dane will experience great pride when he looks out of Valhalla to-day." Putting out one great hand, he patted her soft curls as though she were some shaggy dog, then hurried out to his chief.

It was a respite to be alone, and she accepted it gratefully, sinking among the cushions with closed eyes and a hand on her throbbing wrist. But it was only a respite; she never for a moment lost sight of that. The battle must be faced, and faced boldly. One word

of reluctance would be the surest betrayal of her secret. And betrayal meant — Rothgar! She shivered as she fancied she still felt his greasy touch upon her hair. To become his property that he might even kiss! With a gasp of relief, she turned her thoughts back to the battle.

After all, it was not unthinkable. Her riding would never betray her; and in the confusion, who would notice whether or not she used her sword? She did grow a little cold as the possibility of being killed occurred to her; but even that darkness gave birth to a light. Being dressed in man's garments, it was likely that the Valkyrias would mistake her for a boy; if she bore herself bravely, it was possible that they might carry her up to Valhalla. Should she once reach her father's arms, he would not let Odin himself drive her forth. The hot tears gathered under her lids. If only she could get to her father! He would be glad to see her, and he would be proud of her; Rothgar himself had said it. Even Fridtjof would not be ashamed that she had borne his name. She must be very careful about that, she realized suddenly. He had never known what the word "fear" meant; even in Valhalla he would turn from her, should she disgrace him. It would become an unheard-of wickedness to borrow a name from the helpless dead if you could not wear it worthily. Her conscience smote her now, for her shirking, and she struggled to her feet.

None too soon; above the outside din a horn clarioned, loud and clear. Through the hush that fol-

lowed could be heard the voice of Canute, assigning their positions to the different bands.

"I and my kinsman, Ulf Jarl, shall be foremost. To the right of my standard Edric Jarl shall stand, and the men with whom he joined us. He shall have another standard. To the left of my bodyguard shall stand the men of Eric of Norway. Friends and kinsmen shall stand together. There each will defend the other best."

Then Rothgar's harsh voice sounded, shouting her name, — Fridtjof's name. Giving her scarf a hasty twist about her arm, she knotted it with her teeth; and seizing the sword in her little brown hand clotted with her own blood, she ran out into the tumult.

CHAPTER VII

THE GAME OF SWORDS

It is better for the brave man
Than for the coward
To join in the battle.
It is better for the glad
Than for the sorrowing
In all circumstances.

FAFNISMÁL.

IT would have been a dull soul that would not have been stirred by a sight of the Danish camp. The host was like a forest of mighty trees tossing and swaying before the approach of a storm. Lines of moving helms shot lightning flashes through the dusk of the shady grove; while the hundreds of jubilant voices blended into rumbling thunder. Through the tumult, the blaring horns thrilled like pulse-beats.

Flaring crimson under her brown skin, Randalin's Viking blood leaped to answer the call. For Rothgar's shout she gave another, and laughed out of sheer delight when he tossed her upon the back of a pawing

horse. Away with woman's fears! The world was a grand brave place, and men a race of heroes. To ride by their sides, and share their mighty deeds, and see their glory, — what keener joy had life to offer? Away with fear, with foreboding! The present was all-glorious, and there would be no to-morrow.

Shrill and clear from the opposite hill came the notes of the English horns, as down the green slope moved the ranks of English bowmen. The hum of Danish voices sank in a breathless hush; through the stillness, Tovi, the royal bannerman, galloped to his post. A rustle, a boom, and the great standard was unfurled, giving to the breeze the dread Raven of Denmark. Anxious eyes scanned its mien; should it hang motionless, drooping — but no, it soared like a living bird! Exultation burst from a thousand throats.

Down the line came the young King upon his white war-horse, clad for the battle as for a feast. The sun at noonday is not more fiercely bright than was his face. His long locks flowed behind him on the wind like tongues of yellow flame; and like northern lights in a blue northern sky, the leader's fire flashed in his eyes. So Balder the Beautiful might have come among the Jotuns. So the brawny sweating hard-breathing giants might have jostled and crowded toward him, expectant, adoring.

As he came, he was calling out terrible reminders: words that were to the ears of his champing host what the smell of blood is to the nostrils of wolves.

"Free men, true men, remember that ye face oath-breakers! Remember how they have spoken fine words to us of plighted faith . . . and when we have believed them and laid down our arms . . . they have stolen upon us in our sleep . . . and murdered our comrades! And our kinswomen whom they had taken to be their wives! Remember Saint Brice's day! Remember our murdered kin!"

On he went down the line; and like a trail in his wake, rose an answering chorus of growls and clashing steel. Down some of the battered old faces tears of excitement began to flow, like the water out of the riven rock; while the delirium of others took the form of mirth, so that they sent forth wild terrible laughter to swell the uproar.

Above the tumult his voice rang like a bell: "Heroes and sons of heroes, remember you fight cowards! Remember that, since the days of our fathers, they have made gold do the work of steel. To get gold to buy peace, they will sell their children into slavery. Sooner than look our swords in the face, they will yield us their daughters to be our thralls! Oath-breakers, nithings! Will you be beaten by such? Vikings, Odinmen, forward!"

His answer was the bursting roar of the Danish battle-cry. Like an avalanche loosed from its moorings, they swept down the hillside upon the English bowmen. From that moment, Randalin rode in a dream.

At first it was a glorious dream. On, on, over the green plain, with the wind fresh in her face and the

music of the horns in her ears. The son of Lodbrok was beside her, singing as he went, and tossing his great battle-axe in the air to catch it again by the handle. In front of them rode Canute the King; in his hand his gleaming blade, whose thin edge he tried now and again on a lock of his floating hair, while he laughed with boyish delight. Once he turned his bright face back over his shoulder to call gayly to the Jotun:

"Brother, you were right in despising craft. When the battle-madness fills a man, he becomes a god!"

On, till the bowmen's faces were plain before them; then suddenly it began to hail,—"the hail of the string." Arrows! One hissed by the girl's ear, and one bit her cloak, to hang there quivering with impotent fury. The man on her right made a terrible gurgling sound and put up his hand to tear a shaft from his throat. Would they be slain before — Canute rose in his stirrups with a great shout. The horns echoed it; the trot became a gallop, and the gallop a run. On, on, into the very heart of the hail-cloud. How the stones rattled on the armor! And hissed! There! a man was death-doomed; he was falling.

Her cry was cut short by the flashing of a blade before her. They had passed through the hail and reached the lightning! Throwing up her sword, she swerved to one side and escaped the bolt. Another faced her in this direction. The air was shot with bright flashes. Swish — clash! they sounded behind her; then a sickening jar, as Rothgar's terrible axe fell. A yell of agony rent the air. Swish — clash! the blows

came faster; her ear could no longer separate them. The thud of the falling axes became one continuous pound. Faster and faster, heavier and heavier, — they blended into a discordant roar that closed around her like a wall. Here and there and to and fro, Rothgar's great charger followed the King; and here and there and to and fro, on her foam-flecked horse, Randalin followed the son of Lodbrok, staring, dazed, stunned.

Her wits were like a flock of birds loosed from the cage of her will, alighting here, upstarting there, without let or hindrance. Sometimes they stooped to so foolish a thing as a notch on her horse's ear, and spent whole minutes questioning dully whether the teeth of another horse had made the wound or whether a sword had nicked it in battle. Sometimes they followed the notes of the horns, as the ringing tones passed the order along. From the blaring blast at her ear, the sound was drawn out on either side of her as fine as silver wire, far, far away toward the hills. It gave her no conscious impression of the vastness of the hosts, but it brought a vague sense of wandering, of helplessness, that caused her fluttering wits to turn back, startled, and set to watching the pictures that showed through rifts in the swirling dust clouds, — an Englishman falling from his saddle, his fingers widespread upon the air; a Danish bowman wiping blood from his eyes that he might see to aim his shaft; yonder, the figure of Leofwinesson himself, leaping forward with swift-stabbing sword. But whether they were English who fell or Danes who stood, she had no thought, no

care; they meant no more to her than rune figures carved in wood.

The sun rose higher in the heavens, till it stood directly overhead, and sweat mingled with the blood. Suddenly, the girl awoke to find that Rothgar's singing had changed into cursing.

"Heed him not, King," he was bellowing over his horse's head. "We have no need of trick-bought victories. We bear the highest shields; warrior-skill will win. We need not his snake-wisdom."

To the other side of the young leader, Thorkel the Tall was spurring, bending urgently from his saddle. "Craft, my King! Craft! It will take till nightfall to decide the game. Why spill so much good blood? Listen to Edric the Gainer—"

Canute's furious curse cut him short. "To the Troll with your craft! Swords shall make us, or swords shall mar us. Use your blade, or I will sheathe it in you."

Only the wind that took it from his lips heard the Tall One's answer; for at that moment his horse reared and sheered away before a spear-prick, and into the rift a handful of English rushed with shouts of triumph.

There were no more than half-a-dozen of them, and all were on foot, the two whose gold-hilted swords proclaimed their nobility of birth sharing the lot of their lesser comrades according to the old Saxon war-custom; but it needed not the daring of the attack to mark them as the very flower of English chivalry. The young noble, who hovered around his chief much as

Rothgar circled about Canute, would have been lordly in a serf's tunic; and the leader's royal bearing distinguished him even more than his mighty frame.

At the sight of him, Rothgar uttered a great cry of "Edmund!" and moved forward, swinging his uplifted axe. But the Ironside caught it on his shield and delivered a sword-thrust in return that dropped the Dane's arm by his side. As it fell, Rothgar's left hand plucked forth his blade, but the English king had pressed past him toward his master.

Canute's weapon had need to dart like a northern light. The noble and one of the soldiers had forced their way to the side from which Thorkel had been riven, and a third threatened him from the rear. Three blades stabbed at him as with one motion.

It was a strange thing that saved him, — Randalin could explain it least of all. But in a lightning flash it was burnt into her mind that, while her King's sword was a match for the two in front of him, the one behind was going to deal him his death. And even as she thought it, she found that she had thrown herself across her horse's neck and thrust out her sword-arm, — out with the force of frenzy and down into the shoulder of the Englishman. In a kind of dazed wonder, she saw his blade fall from his grasp and his eyes roll up at her, as he staggered backwards.

Canute laughed out, "Well done, Berserker!" and redoubled his play against those before him.

A turn of his wrist disarmed the soldier, and his point touched the young noble's breast; but before he

could lunge, the mighty figure of Edmund rose close at hand, his blade heaved high above his head.

For such a stroke there was no parry. A kingdom seemed to be passing. Canute threw his shield before him, while his spur caused his horse to swerve violently; but the blade cleft wood and iron and golden plating like parchment, and falling on the horse's neck, bit it to the bone. Rearing and plunging with pain, the animal crashed into those behind him, missed his footing and fell, entangling his rider in the trappings. Bending over him, the Ironside struck again.

But the son of Lodbrok had still his left arm. Bearing his shield, it shot out over the body of his King. The falling brand bit this screen also, and lopped off the hand that held it, but the respite was sufficient. In a flash Canute was on his feet, both hands grasping the hilt of his high-flung sword.

It was a mighty blow, but it fell harmless. A sudden surge in the tide of struggling bodies swept the Ironside out of reach and engulfed him in a whirlpool of Danish swords. He laid about him like mad, and was like to have cleared a passage back, when a second wave carried him completely from view.

Canute cursed at the anxious faces that surrounded him. "What means it, this swaying? What is herding them? Who are flying? Fools! Can you not tell a retreat? Bid the horns blow—"

"The English!" bellowed Rothgar. "The English are flying—Edmund's head! Yonder!"

Frode's daughter had Viking blood, but she hid her face with a cry. There it was, high upon a spear-point, dripping, ghastly. Could the sun shine upon such a thing?

Ay, and men could rejoice at it. Above the panic scream she heard cries of savage joy.

But Canute sat motionless, on the new horse they had brought him. "It is not possible," he muttered. "The flight began while he still faced me. It was their crowding that saved him."

To stare before him, Rothgar let the blood pour unheeded from his wounded arm. "Yonder Edmund rides now!" he gasped. "You can tell him by his size— Yonder! Now he is tearing off his helmet—"

Nor was he mistaken; within spear-throw the mighty frame of the Ironside towered above his struggling guard. As he bared his head, they could even distinguish his face with its large elegantly-formed features and Ethelred's prominent chin. Brandishing his sword, shouting words of reassurance, exposing his person without a thought of the darts aimed at him, he was making a heroic effort to check the rush of his panic-stricken host. There was no question both that he was alive and that he knew who was belying him; even as they looked he hurled his spear, with a cry of rage, at the form of Edric Jarl.

Missing the Mercian, it struck down a man at his side; and high above the voice of the ill-fated King rose the shrill alarms of the traitor's heralds.

"Fly, ye men of Dorsetshire and Devon! Fly and save yourselves! Here is your Edmund's head!"

Randalin stared about her, doubting her senses. But light had begun to dawn on Canute. He wheeled sharply, as Thorkel pushed his horse to their sides.

"Whose head was that?" he demanded.

Thorkel's face was a lineless mask. "I believe his name was Osmaer," he answered without emotion. "It was unheard-of good fortune that he should be so like Edmund in looks."

The young King's face was suffused with bitterness. "Good fortune!" he cried sharply. "Good fortune! Am I a fool or a coward that I am never to win except by craft or good fortune? Had you let me alone—" His voice broke, so bitter was his disappointment.

His foster-father regarded him from under lowered lids.

"Would you have won without them to-day?" he inquired.

"Yes!" Canute cried savagely, "had you given me time. Yes!"

But what else he answered, Randalin never knew. Some unseen obstacle turned in their direction the stream of rushing horsemen. In an instant the torrent had caught them in its whirling eddies, and they were so many separate atoms borne along on the flood. To hold back was to be thrown down; to fall was to be trampled into rags. The battle had changed into a hunt.

Thundering hoof-beats, crashing blows, shrieks and groans and falling bodies, — a sense of being caught in a wolf pack took possession of the girl; and the feeling grew with every sidelong glance she had of the savage sweating dust-grimed faces, in their jungles of blood-clotted hair. The battle-madness was upon them, and they were no longer men, but beasts of prey. Amid the chaos of her mind, a new idea shaped itself like a new world. If she could but work her way to the edge of the herd, she might escape down one of those green aisles opening before them. If she only could! Every fibre in her became intent upon it.

A little opening showed on her right. Though she could not see the ground before her, she took the risk and swung her horse into the breach. His forefeet came down upon the body of a fallen man, but it was too late to draw back. Gripping her lip in her teeth, she spurred him on. The man turned over with a yell, and used his one unbroken arm to thrust upward his broken sword. The blade cut her leg to the bone, and she shrieked with the pain; but her startled horse had no thought of stopping. Making his way with plunges and leaps, he carried her out of the press sooner than she could have guided him out. Once on the edge, he broke into a run. The agony of the shaken wound was unbearable. Shrieking and moaning, she twisted her hands in the lines and tried to stop him. But her strength was ebbing from her with her blood. By and by she dropped the rein altogether and clung to the saddle-bow.

They reached the woods at last, cool and sweet and hushed in holy peace. The frantic horse plunged into one of the arching lanes, and the din of the hunt died behind her; silence fell like a curtain at their heels; even the thudding hoof-beats were softened on the leafy ground. Randalin lay along the horse's neck now, and her senses had begun to slip away from her like the tide from the shore. It occurred to her that she was dying, and that the Valkyrias could not find her if she should be carried too far away from the battle-field. Trying to hold them back, she stretched a feeble hand toward the trees; and it seemed to her that they did not glide past quite so rapidly. And the green river that had been rushing toward her, that passed under her more slowly too. Sometimes she could even make out violets amid the waves. But the waves were rising strangely, she thought, — rising, rising —

At last, she felt their cool touch upon her forehead. They had risen and stopped her. Somewhere, there was the soft thud of a falling body; then the cool greenness closed around her and held her tenderly, a crumpled leaf that the whirlwind had dropped from its sport.

CHAPTER VIII

TAKEN CAPTIVE

No one turns from good, if it can be got.

HÁVAMÁL.

YING drowned in cool silence, the girl came slowly to a consciousness that someone was stooping over her. Raising her heavy lids, her eyes rested on a man's face, showing dimly in the dusk of the starlight.

He said in English, "Canute's page, by the Saints!"

A chorus of voices answered him: "The fiend's brat that pierced your shoulder?" — "Choke him!" — "Better he die now than after he has waxed large on English blood." — "Finish him!"

Opening her eyes wider, she found that heads and shoulders made a black hedge around her.

The victim of her blade straightened, shaking his shaggy mane. "Were I a Pagan Dane, I would run my sword through him. But I am a Christian Englishman. Let him lie. He will bleed his life out before morning."

"Come on, then," the chorus growled. "The Etheling is asking what hinders us." — "Make haste!" — "The Etheling is here!"

While the warrior was turning, a new voice spoke.

"Canute's page?" it repeated after some unseen informant. "Is he dead?"

It was a young voice, and deep and soft, for all the note of quiet authority ringing through it; something in its tone was agreeably different from the harsh utterance of the first speaker. Randalin's eyes rose dreamily to find the owner.

He had ridden up behind the others on a prancing white horse. Above the black hedge, the square strength of his shoulders and the graceful lines of his helmed head were silhouetted sharply against the starry sky. Why had they so familiar a look? Ah! the noble who had followed Edmund —

So far she got, and then all was blotted out in a flash of pain, as the man nearest her put out a hand and touched her torn limb.

"Wriggling like a fish, lord," he answered the new-comer.

A sound on the soft turf told that the horseman had alighted. "The bantling is of too good quality to leave," he said good-naturedly. "Catch my bridle, Oswin. Where is he wounded?"

He made a quick step toward her, then paused as suddenly, his chin thrust out in listening. A gesture of his hand imposed a sudden silence, through which the sound became distinct to all ears, — a trampling

and crashing in the brush beyond the moonlit open. As they wheeled to face it, a shout came from that direction.

"What ho! Does the Lord of Ivarsdale go there?"

He whom they had called the Etheling drew himself up alertly. "I make no answer to hedge-creepers," he said. "Come out where you can be seen."

The voice took on a mocking edge. "There is no gainsaying that I feel safer here. I am the messenger of Edric of Mercia."

Only a warning sign from the Lord of Ivarsdale restrained an angry chorus. He said with slow contempt, "I grant that it is well fitting the Gainer's deeds that his men should flinch from the light—"

"Misgreet me not," the mocking voice interrupted. "Before cockcrow we shall be sworn brothers. I bear a message to King Edmund. And I want you to further me on my way by telling which direction will fetch me to his camp."

Derisive laughter went up from the band of King's men. Their leader snapped his fingers.

"That for your slippery devices! Is the Gainer so ill-advised as to imagine that he is dealing with a second Ethelred?"

"I tell you to keep in mind," the voice retorted, "that before the cock crows we shall be sworn brothers."

The Etheling's anger leaped out like a flame; even in the starlight it could be seen how his face crimsoned.

"No, as God lives!" he answered swiftly. "It is

not to Edmund alone that the Gainer is loathful. Should he pass the King's sword, a hundred blades wait for him, mine among them. Seek what he may seek, he shall not have peace of us. When I guide a wolf to my sheep-fold, I will show you the way to Edmund's camp. Take yourself out of reach if you would not be sped with arrows."

A jeering laugh was the only answer, but the tramping of hoofs suggested that his advice was being taken.

When the sound had faded quite away, the Lord of Ivarsdale breathed out the rest of his resentment in a hearty imprecation, and, turning, came on to his patient. His voice was as gentle as a woman's as he dropped on his knee beside the slim figure.

"What is your need, little fire-eater?"

A memory of her haunting terror stirred in the girl. Shrinking from him, she made a desperate effort to push away his outstretched hand, threatening him in a broken whisper.

"If you touch me — I will — kill you."

They were brave men, those Englishmen. The Etheling only smiled, and one of his warriors chuckled. With a touch as gentle as it was strong, he put aside her resisting hands and began swiftly to cut away the blood-stiffened hose. Darkness closed around Randalin again, darkness shot with zigzag lightnings of pain, and throbbing with pitiful moans.

The idea took possession of her that she was once more on the battle-field, that it was the cries of the

men who were falling around her which pierced the air, and their weapons that stabbed her as they fell. Then their hands clutched her in a dying grip. Horsemen loomed up before her and came nearer, and she could not get out of their path, though she struggled with all her force. The hoofs were almost upon her. . . . Uttering a wild scream, she put forth all her strength in a last effort.

"It will be like holding a young tiger, lord," a harsh voice suddenly reached her ear.

She came to herself to find that soldiers were lifting her up to the horseman, where he sat again in his saddle. She recognized the squareness of his shoulders; and she knew the gentleness of his touch as he slipped his free arm around her and drew her carefully into place, making of his stalwart body a support for her weakness. No strength was in her to struggle against him; only her wide bright eyes sought his, with the terror of a snared bird.

Meeting the look and understanding a small part of its question, he said a reassuring word in his pleasant low-pitched voice: "Be of good cheer, youngling; there is no thought of eating you. I will bring you to a cup of wine before moonrise, if you hold fast."

It is doubtful if the girl so much as heard him. Her eyes were passing from feature to feature of his face, as the stars revealed it above her, — from the broad comely brow to the square young chin, from the clean-cut fine-tempered mouth to the clear true eyes. One by one she noted them, and shade by shade her

strained look of fear relaxed. Slowly she forgot her dread; and forgetting, her mind wandered to other things, — to memories of her father, and of the happy evenings by the fire when she had nestled safe in his arms, — safe and sheltered and beloved. With eyes still turned up toward his face, her lids drooped and fell; and her head sank upon his breast and lay there, in the peace of perfect faith.

CHAPTER IX

THE YOUNG LORD OF IVARSDALE

Brand is kindled from brand
Till it is burnt out;
Fire is kindled from fire;
A man gets knowledge
By talk with a man,
But becomes wilful by self-conceit.

HÁVAMÁL.

TAP — tap, tap — tap, like water dripping slowly. Drop by drop the sound filtered through the thick wrappings of Randalin's slumber, till she knew it for the beat of horses' hoofs, and stirred and opened her eyes.

The silver shimmer of starlight falling through purple deeps had given way to the ruddy glare of a camp fire, and she was lying just beyond its heat, cloak-wrapped, on a bed of leaves. Above her, interlacing beech boughs made an arching roof, under which the shadows clustered as swallows under eaves. Before her, green tree-lanes opened out like corridors. As far as the fireglow could reach, they

were flooded with golden light; where it stopped, they were closed across by darkness as by gray-black doors. Within the sylvan alcove, some four-score battle-stained warriors were taking their ease after a hard day. Some of them were engaged in the ghastly business of bandaging wounds, and some were already asleep; but the greater number lounged in the fire-light, drinking and feasting on strips of venison which serfs had cooked in the flames.

Through the fog of her drowsiness Randalin recognized them slowly. Yonder was the Englishman who had found her in the bushes. Beyond him, across the fire, the soldiers who had lifted her up to the horseman. Here, just in front of her, was the leader himself. Her gaze settled upon him dreamily.

He had finished his meal, if meal it could be called, and was making some attempt at a toilet. While one serf knelt beside him, scrubbing at his muddy riding-boots with a wisp of wet grass, another held a gilt shield up for a mirror, and before this the Etheling was carefully parting his shining hair. His captive's eyes were not the only ones upon him, and the bright metal showed that he was laughing a little at the comments his performance drew forth from the three old cnihts lounging near him.

"Tending by five hairs to the sword-side, Lord Sebert," one of them was offering quizzical criticism over his drinking-horn.

"The Etheling must needs have extraordinary respect for the endurance of Harald Fairhair, for it is

said that to accomplish a vow he went three years without barbering himself," another said gravely. While a third became slyly reminiscent, as he chewed his venison.

"These are soft days, comrades. The last time I followed the old chief, of honored memory, we held our war-council standing knee-deep in a fen. We had neither eaten nor drunk for two days, and three days' blood was on our hands."

The young chief took it all with careless good-humor.

"When you leave off eating, in memory of that brave time, I will leave off washing," he returned. "Would you have me go into a royal council looking as though birds had nested in my hair?" With a parting scrutiny of his smooth locks, he motioned the shield-bearer aside and turned back to them his comely face, rosy from his recent ablutions and alight with a momentary enthusiasm.

"I tell you, nothing but a warrior's life becomes ethel-born men," he said as he straightened himself with a gallant gesture. "Nor sluggishness nor junketings, but days under fire and nights among the Wise Men of the council; that, in truth, becomes their station. By Saint Mary, I feel that I have never lived before! One week at the heels of Edmund Ironside is worth a lifetime under the banner of any other king."

A pause met his warmth somewhat coldly; and the warrior who broke the silence lowered his voice to do it.

"Keep in mind, lord, that it is no more than a week that you have been at his heels," he said.

"Likewise bear in mind whose son he is," the man with the drinking-horn added grimly. He was a stout white-bearded old cniht with an obstinate old face that looked something like a ruddy apple in a snow-bank.

Flushing, the young noble ceased examining his sword-edge to meet the eyes bent upon him.

"I hope you do not think I stand in need of a rebuke for lukewarmness, Morcard," he said gravely. "I have no more forgot that King Edmund's father gave the order for my father's murder than I have forgot that Edric was the tool who did the deed. May Saint Peter exterminate him with his sword! Did I not live even as a lordless man the while that Ethelred remained upon the throne? But what sense to continue at that after Ethelred was dead, and the valor of his son was to that degree exalted as if he had sprung from Alfred? Yourself counselled me to join him at Gillingham, and take the post under his banner that my fathers have always held beside his fathers."

Two of the three warriors made no other answer than to gurgle their drink noisily in their throats; but the one whom he had called Morcard answered dryly, "It is not against testing the new king that we would advise you, Lord Sebert; it is against trusting him. But we will not be troublesome." He lifted his hand suddenly to his ear. "Horses' feet! And stopping by the King's fire—"

What else he said, Randalin did not hear. Her wits had crawled heavily after the sound of the hoofs. Now the beat changed to a champing and stamping among dry leaves not many rods to her right. She wondered indifferently if there was any likelihood of their running over her; then forgot the query before she had answered it.

The Etheling was speaking again, with all the earnestness of hero-worship.

"— the battles he has fought, the abundance of warriors he has gathered together, the land he has won back since his father's death! Only take to-day —"

"Ay, take to-day!" the old man snapped him up with unexpected vehemence. "And the Devil take me if I ever heard of such witless folly! What! To go plunging off into the thick of the enemy, endangering in his person the hope of the whole English nation —"

The young noble relaxed from his earnestness to laugh. "Now has habit outrid your manners, Morcard. So long have you been wont to use your tongue on my heedlessness, that it begins mechanically to perform the same office for Edmund. In a king, such courage inspires —"

"Courage!" Morcard's fingers snapped loudly. "Did not the henchman who followed you have courage? Yet do we think of crowning him? I tell you that a king needs to have something besides courage. He needs to have judgment. Then will he know better than to leave his men like sheep without a leader. The

old proverb has it right, 'When the chief fails, the host quails.' It was when they had become frightened about him that they began to give way, and after that it was easy for any oaf to jump out of the bushes and put them to flight."

This time the Etheling's smile was rather unwilling. "Oh! If you think fit to set at naught a brave deed because nothing arose from it! After his father's cowardice, such energy and dauntlessness alone—"

"Dauntlessness!" the old cniht snorted again. "It is the dauntlessness of the man in Father Ingulph's story, who was so much wiser than his advisers that he must try to drive the sun a new way, till it came so nigh as it nighest may to setting the world afire." So hot was his scorn that he was obliged to cool it in his ale, coming to the surface slightly mollified. "However, Lord Sebert, you have cast your colt's-teeth, and I have no desire to tread upon the toes of your dignity. If I have been over-free, excuse it in your father's old servant and comrade who has guarded and guided you since—since you have had teeth to cast."

The young man laughed good-humoredly as he straightened himself for action. "Too often has my dignity bent under your rod, Morcard, to hold itself very stiff against you now. Never fear; I will be an owl of discretion. Give you favorable dreams over your horns!" He picked up his cloak and was turning to depart, when one of the warriors flung up a hand.

"Soft, my lord. Yonder comes Wikel making strange signs to you."

All heads but Randalin's turned in the direction he was looking. She was still too lethargic for curiosity; and she found a kind of dreamy content in lying with her eyes upon the Etheling's handsome face. Though its prevailing characteristic was the easy amiability of one who has known little of opposition or dislike, there was no lack of steel in the blue eyes or of iron in the square chin; now and then a spark betrayed them, thrilling pleasantly through her drowsiness.

Presently, however, between her and the comely apparition there intervened the brawny figure of a yeoman-soldier.

He said breathlessly, "Chief — before you go to the King — be it known to you that those horse-feet you heard — belong to the mounts of Edric of Mercia and his men — and he is with King Edmund now!"

The three stolid old warriors got to their feet with curses. The Etheling bent forward to gaze incredulously into the man's face.

"Edric of Mercia? With the King? Why do you think so?"

"I was a little way beyond the King's fire, watching a fellow who was showing how he could jump over the flames, when I saw the Gainer ride past; and I followed him, as near as the guards would permit — near enough to see that the King received him — let him settle it with Saint Cuthbert!"

There was a pause of utter stupefaction; then, from all within hearing, a clamorous outburst: "It is the Gainer's luck again!"—"The messenger knew what he was saying!"—"No sharpness of wit can comprehend it!"—"It is the magic of his flattering tongue."—"A hundred tongues had done no harm if Edmund—" The voices sank into a snarling undertone: "Ay, there it is!"—"Ethelred's blood!"—"It is no more to be counted on than is water—" "What could have moved him to it?"

Morcard's throat emitted a sound that might have been a chuckle or might have been a growl. "I will tell you plainly for why; it is his dauntlessness. He is going to pit his green wit against Edric's, that has made two kings as wax between his fingers! And he has begun by letting the wolf into the fold."

It appeared that the Etheling had recovered from his surprise, for now he said steadily, "I will not believe it. Until their oaths have been spoken and their hands have clasped and my own eyes have witnessed it, I will not believe it of him."

Motioning them from his path, he was starting forward a second time, when the old cniht laid a hand lightly upon his shoulder.

"Hear me, Lord Sebert! If then,—to weigh all perils like a soldier,—if then, you do witness it with your own eyes?"

The blue gave out a flash of smitten steel.

Morcard answered as to words: "You will be one against many, lord."

"You cannot mean that the Witan will comply with him!" the Etheling cried.

"How is it possible that they should do otherwise? The odal-born men could not prevent it when Ethelred took Alfric back. And to-night, few but thanes have resorted thither — men whom the Redeless took from ploughing his fields to gild with nobility. Is it likely that they will oppose the hand that can strip off their gilding?"

It appeared that the young man could find no answer to that, for he made none.

"At least once, my lord, Ethelred's wilfulness has shown in his son, when he set aside the King's command to take possession of Sigeferth's widow and her estates. And I think it was Ethelred's temper that moved him to spend an energy, much better directed against the Pagans, in laying waste two of his own shires. Remember what happened when your father raised himself against Ethelred."

Restive under the restraining hand, the young noble faced him desperately. "Morcard, in God's name, what would you have me do? I will not bend to it, nor would you wish me to. Or sooner or later —"

"Let it be later, lord. After you have had time to marshal your wits, and when it is daylight, and you have your men at your back."

After a while, the Etheling yielded and turned aside. "Let it be as you have said — though I cannot believe yet that it will happen." Coming back where a fallen

tree made a mossy seat, he dropped down upon it and sat staring at the ground in frowning abstraction.

The motion dropped him out of the range of Randalin's vision, and her eyes wandered away discontentedly. If there was nothing more to look at, she might as well go to sleep. The fire was dying down so that the overhanging shadow was drooping lower, like a canopy that would fall and smother them when the spears of light that upheld it should sink at last in the ashes. The doors of darkness had moved far up the tree-corridors, and strange flickering shapes peered through. Her eyes followed them heavily. The forest was very still now; even the grating sound of the frogs was hushed, and the low hum of the voices around the fire was soothing as the sound of swarming bees.

She was just losing consciousness when the figure of a second yeoman-soldier moved across her vision, looming black against the fireglow. His whisper came sharply to her ears.

"It is done, chief. May they have the wrath of the Almighty! Their hands have met, Edric's and the King's, and his thanes' and Norman of Baddeby's, who is with Edric. Now are they lying down in their mantles, as it were to seal their pledge by sleeping within reach of each other's knives."

"Norman of Baddeby!" the name leaped out of the rest to bite at her like a dog, worrying deeper and deeper through the wrappings of her stupor. Her eyes widened in troubled questioning. She heard the angry voices rise, and she saw the Etheling leap to his feet

and shake his clenched hand above his head. Then she lost sight of everything, for the fang had pierced her torpor and touched her.

"Norman of Baddeby" — her father's slayer! Memory entered like poison to spread burning through every vein. Her father — Fridtjof — the Jotun — the battle — Her ears were dinned with terrible noises; her eyes were seared by terrible pictures. She crushed her hands against her head, but the sound came from within and would not be stilled. She buried her face in the leaves, but the visions pressed faster before her. The son of Leofwine and the drunken feast — the girl outside the tent — the Jotun within it — her terrible young guardian — the battle-madness — whichever way she looked, a new spectre confronted her. Helpless in their grip, she tossed to and fro in agony — to and fro.

Though it was so tortured that she could not tell it from her waking thoughts, sleep must have come to her; for when at last she reached the point where she could endure it no longer and struggled up, panting, to her elbow, to try to recall herself by a sight of those about her, she found that the hum of excited voices was stilled, and the silence throbbed with the deep breathing of sleepers. From under the canopy of darkness the fiery spears had dropped away, leaving the thick folds sagging lower and lower. Swarming under its shelter, the shadow-shapes were closing in upon her.

For a while she watched them absently; then a whim of her tortured brain poisoned them also. They

became terrible nameless Things, mouthing at her, darting upon her. She drew her eyes resolutely away and set herself to listening to the breathing that throbbed in a dozen keys through the silence.

Almost at her feet, the Etheling was stretched out in his cloak, motionless as the fallen tree. Her face was slowly relaxing when, a second time, memory betrayed her. Just so, she recollected, Leofwine's son was lying, not a hundred yards away. Through the trees, the glow of the King's fire came distinctly; gazing toward it, she could almost convince herself that she could see the murderer, peaceful, secure. She ground her teeth in a sudden spasm of rage. Would that some of those weak-witted thanes would prove the mettle of the knives he was daring!

The next instant, she had thrown herself down with terror-widened eyes, and was trying to bury her face in the leaves, while the tongueless mouth of every shadowy shape seemed to shriek above her, —

"Odin sends you revenge!" — "It is the will of Odin that has drawn you together!" — "Strange and wonderful is the way in which you are hesitating!" — "Would you become like the girl with the necklace?" — "Are you a coward, that you do not prefer to die in good repute rather than live in the shame of neglecting your duty?"

She flung up her haggard face in appeal. "No, no, I am not a coward," her spirit cried within her. "I was brave in the battle. It is not death I fear; but I cannot kill! Odin, have mercy on me! I cannot kill.

I have tried to be brave, but I am really a woman; it is not possible for me to have a man's heart."

The grinning shadows mouthed at her. "You have not dared to be a woman," they mocked. "You have not dared to be a woman, so you must dare to be a man."

A night wind shuddered through the trees, and the hovering shades seemed to hiss in her ear.

"Coward! Traitor! Nithing! Do you not get afraid that you will experience the wrath of the dead? Listen! Is that the wind rustling the leaves? Or is it—"

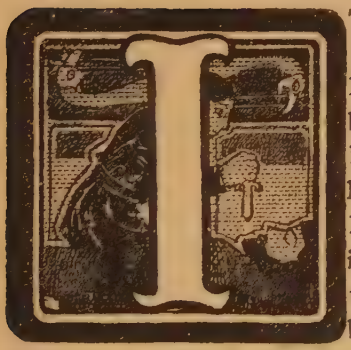
A gasp burst from the white lips, and the die was cast. While the cold drops started on her pain-racked body, she dragged herself to her knees and fumbled with trembling hands about her belt. For an instant, something like a moonbeam glimmered amid the shadow; then her lips closed convulsively upon the steel. Tipping forward upon her hands, she tested cautiously the strength of her wounded leg, smothering groans of pain that seemed to tear her throat in the swallowing. But the whispering of the night-wind was like a spur in her side; inch by inch, she crawled steadily toward the flickering light.

CHAPTER X

AS THE NORNS DECREE

This I thee counsel tenthly;
That thou never trust
A foe's kinsman's promises,
Whose brother thou hast slain,
Or sire laid low;
There is a wolf
In a young son,
Though he with gold be gladdened.

SIGRDRÍFUMÁL.



IT was a long way to the King's fire, but at last it lay before her; before and below her, for it had been built in a depression of the little open. The last charred log had fallen apart, spreading a swarm of golden glow-worms over the black earth, but there was still enough light to reveal a ring of muffled forms sprawling around the sloping sides of the hollow, with their feet toward the fire and their heads lost in darkness. Pausing in the tree-shadow, the girl thrilled with sudden hope. Since their faces were all hidden, how was she to distinguish her victim? Even the dead must see

that it would be impossible. If the burden could only be lifted from her!

Fate was inexorable. At that moment, the warrior directly in front of her stirred in his sleep and flung a jewelled hand over his face. Those broad gold rings with the green stones that sparkled like serpents' eyes as they caught the light! They were fixed indelibly in her memory, for she had seen them on the rapacious hand that had seized upon her while it was still red with her father's blood. Only from them, she could reconstruct every hard line of the hidden face. Suddenly, in the rage that rose in her at the recollection, she found determination for the deed.

The sentinel nearest her was snoring at his post; the further one would not be able to reach her in time, even should he see her. Somewhere, far away, a cock was crowing; and it came to her suddenly that the breathlessness about her was the hush that precedes the dawn. There was no time to lose, she told herself feverishly, and moved forward with snake-like stillness. Between the sheltering arm and the neck of the steel shirt there was a space of naked throat. Setting her teeth, she raised her knife and struck down at it with a strong hand.

The point never reached its mark. For an instant she could not tell what had happened. Fingers closed like iron bands around her wrist, pulling her backwards so that the pain of her twisted wound wrung a cry from her lips. They were not Norman's fingers,

yet he also was stirring; while darting flashes from the dusk about them told that the other sleepers were drawing their weapons. Then some one threw a branchful of dead leaves upon the fire.

The flame that flared up showed her arm to be in the grasp of the Lord of Ivarsdale.

"You mad young one!" he gasped, as he wrenched the blade from her hold.

Voices rose in angry questioning, but Randalin was too fear-benumbed to understand what they said. Norman's keen eyes were turned upon her, and recognition was dawning in their gaze. Suddenly, he snatched her from Sebert's grasp and held her down to the firelight.

Could she have seen the mask which dust and blood had made for her, she would have been spared the terror-swoon that left her limp in his grasp. But it only bewildered her when, after an instant's scrutiny, he let her fall with an angry laugh.

"The boy from Avalcomb! Certainly these Danes are as hard to kill as cats! I would have sworn to it that I had separated his life from his body not eight-and-forty hours ago." A gleam of eagerness came into his face, and he bent over her again. "You shall serve my purpose by your obstinacy," he said under his breath. "You shall tell me where your sister is. You know, for you escaped together. When I was restored to my senses, I found you both gone. Tell me where she lies hidden, and it may be that I will grant to you a longer life."

Her stiff lips could not have spoken an answer had her paralyzed brain been able to frame one. She could only gaze back at him in helpless waiting.

A second time he was bending toward her, when something stopped him midway so that he straightened and drew back with a bow. It came to her suddenly that they were all bowing, and that the hubbub had died in mid-air. Through the hush, a quiet voice spoke.

"You are eager in rising, my lords," it said.

From the shelter, half cave, half bower, which had been contrived amid the bushes, a warrior of mighty frame had emerged and stood examining the scene. Though with soldierly hardiness he had taken his rest in his war-harness, he was unhelmed, and the light that revealed the protruding chin had no need to pick out the jewelled diadem to mark him as Edmund Ironside. The irregularity was very slight—not large enough to give him a combative look or to mar the fine proportions of his face, but it did unquestionably add to his stately bearing an expression of complacency that was unforgettable.

He repeated his inquiry: "What is the amusement, my thanes? From the clamor which awakened me, I had some notion of an attack."

Norman of Baddeby bent in a second reverence. "Your expectations are to this degree fulfilled, my royal lord," he made answer. "Behold the enemy!" Stooping, he raised the red-cloaked figure by its collar and held it up in the firelight. As a murmur of laugh-

ter went around, he lowered it again and spoke more gravely. "A hand needs not be large to get a hilt under its gripe, however. The young wolf is of northern breed, — how he penetrated to the heart of an English camp, I cannot tell, — and there grows in his spirit a bloodthirsty disposition. He seeks my life because in a skirmish, a few days gone by, I had the good luck to kill his father. If it —"

He said more, but Randalin did not listen to him. All at once Sebert of Ivarsdale reached out, and taking her by her cloak, drew her gently to his side, interposing his sword-arm between her and the others. Though his hand manacled her slim wrists securely, the clasp was more one of protection than of restraint; and the warm human touch was like a talisman against the haunting shadows. Suddenly it came over her, in a burst of heavenly relief, that this hand had lifted the burden of vengeance forever. Even Fridtjof could not be so unreasonable as to ask more of her, so plainly was it Odin's will that justice should be left for Canute. She had done her duty, and yet she was free of it — free of it! Her heart burst out singing within her, and the eyes she raised toward her captor were adoring in their gratitude.

The look she met in return was the same look of mingled strength and gentleness which had come through the starlight to answer her question. Once again that calm of weary trustfulness settled over her. Since he had saved her from the dead, she had no doubt whatever of his ability to save her from the

living. Her head drooped against his arm, and her hands, ceasing their struggles, rested in his grasp like folded wings.

It had not taken a moment; the instant Norman finished his explanation, the Etheling was speaking quietly: "As the Lord of Baddeby says, King Edmund, it was I who stayed the boy's hand, and it was I also who fetched him into camp. I found him after the battle, bleeding his life out in the bushes, and I brought him in my arms, like a kitten, and dropped him down by my fire. Waking in the night and missing him, I traced him hither. As I have had all to do with him in the past, so, if you will grant that I may keep him, will I take his future upon me. With your consent, I will attend to it that he does no more mischief."

A momentary cordiality came into the King's manner; as though recognizing it for the first time, he turned to the figure across the fire with a courteous gesture. "My lord of Ivarsdale! I am much beholden to you. Had any chance wrought evil to the Lord of Baddeby while under my safeguard, my honor would have been as deeply wounded as my feelings."

As he bowed in acknowledgment, some embarrassment was visible in Sebert's manner; but he was spared a reply, for after a moment's rubbing of his chin, the King continued, —

"As regards the boy, however, there is something besides his knife to be taken into consideration. I think we run more risk from his tongue."

The words of the Earl's thane fairly grazed the heels of the King's words: "The imp can do no otherwise than harm, my sovereign. Should he bring his tongue to Danish ears, he could cause the utmost evil. For the safety of the Earl of Mercia, — ay, for your own need, — I entreat you to deliver the boy up to my keeping."

"I am no less able than the Lord of Baddeby to restrain him," the Etheling said with some warmth. "If it be your pleasure, King Edmund, I will keep him under my hand until the end of the war, and answer for his silence with my life."

Then Norman's eagerness got the better of his discretion.

"Now, by Saint Dunstan," he cried, "you take too much upon you, Lord of Ivarsdale! The boy's life is forfeit to me, against whom his crime was directed." A grim look squared his mouth as suddenly he stretched his hand past Sebert and caught the red cloak.

It may have been this which the Etheling had foreseen, for he was not taken by surprise. Jerking up his sword-arm, he knocked the thane's hand loose with scant ceremony.

"You forget the law of the battle-field, Norman of Baddeby," he said swiftly. "The life of my captive is mine, and I am the last man to permit it to be taken because he sought a just revenge. I know too well how it feels to hate a father's murderer." He shot a baleful glance toward a half-seen figure that all

this time had stood motionless in the shadow behind the King.

Probably this figure and the Earl's thane were the only hearers he was conscious of, but his tone left the words open to all ears. There was a sudden indrawing of many breaths, followed by a frightened silence. The only sound that disturbed it was a growing rustle in the bush around them, which was explained when the old cniht Morcard and some two-score armed henchmen and yeoman-soldiers, singly and in groups, filtered quietly through the shadows and placed themselves at their chief's back.

But though the King's brows had met for an instant in a lowering arch, some second thought controlled him. When he spoke, his words were even gracious:

"I think the Lord of Ivarsdale has the right of it. The crime the boy purposed was not carried out; and in each case, Lord Sebert was his captor. I am content to trust to his wardership."

Sebert's frank face betrayed his surprise at the complaisance, but he gave his pledge and his thanks with what courtliness he could muster, and releasing his passive prisoner, pushed her gently into the safekeeping of the old cniht. Yet he was not so obtuse as to step back, as though the incident were closed; he read the King's inflection more correctly than that. Holding himself somewhat stiff in the tenseness of his feelings, he stood his ground in silent alertness.

A rustle of uneasiness crept the round of the assembled nobles. Only the monarch's bland composure remained unruffled. Advancing with the deliberate grace that so well became his mighty person, he seated himself upon a convenient boulder and signed the figure in the shadow to draw nearer.

As it obeyed, every one of the yeomen-soldiers strained his eyes in that direction, as though hoping to surprise in the great traitor's face some secret of his power, the power that had made three kings as wax between his fingers! But just short of the fire-glow the Gainer paused, and the hooded cloak which shrouded him merged him hopelessly into the shadow. Only the hand that rested on his sword-hilt protruded into the light. It was a broad hand, and thick-fingered as a butcher's, but it was milk-white and weighted with massive rings.

Meanwhile, the King was speaking affably: "As you did not favor us with your presence among the Wise Men, my lord, it is likely that you do not know of the good luck which has befallen our cause. This prudent Earl, who before the battle had concluded with himself that England had so little to hope for from our reign that he was willing to throw his weight against us, has found his victory so without relish that he has become our sworn ally."

As he paused, — perhaps to leave space for an answer, — the complacency of his face was heightened by a smile, faintly shrewd, touching the corners of his mouth. But when Sebert limited his reply to a re-

spectful inclination of his head, the smile vanished abruptly. Under the affability there became evident a certain stern insistence.

"In former days, I think there was some hostile temper between the Earl and you. But I expect you will see that under the stress of a foreign war all lesser strife must give way. So I desire that you will repeat in my presence the troth already plighted by these others."

He made a slight gesture, and the Gainer took a step forward. The light that fell back from his hooded face played curiously about his jewelled hand; as it rose from the gilded hilt, it could be seen that to remedy the bluntness of the thick fingers the nails had been allowed to grow very long, which gave it now, in its half-curve, the look of a claw, upon which the red gems shone like blood-drops.

Hesitating, the Etheling went from red to white. Then, with a swift motion, he unsheathed his sword and stretched it out, point-foremost.

"King Edmund," he said, "in no other way does my hand go forth toward a traitor."

This time there was no sound of breaths drawn in; it was as though the whole world had ceased breathing. The sternness that had underlain the King's manner rose slowly and spread over the whole surface of his person, as he drew himself up in towering offence.

"Lord of Ivarsdale, bethink yourself to whom you speak!"

He was royally imposing in his displeasure; the Etheling flushed like a boy before his master; but he had his answer ready, and his head was steadily erect as he gave it.

"King of the Angles, the right of open speech has belonged to my race as long as the right to the crown has belonged to yours. So my father's fathers spoke to yours under the council-tree, and so I shall speak to you while I live."

Back in the shadow, each yeoman laid one hand upon his weapon, and with the other, thrust an exulting thumb into his neighbor's ribs. But they did not turn to look at each other; every eye was fastened upon the two by the fire. Freeman and his leader, or feudal lord and his dependant? For the moment they stood forth as representatives of a mighty conflict, and every breath hung upon their motions.

After a time the King made a slight movement with his shoulders.

"I should have remembered," he said, "that your father was ruined by rebellion."

In a flash the rebel's son had forgotten boyish embarrassment. "Whoso told you that, royal lord, told you lies. My father stood upon his right. Steel to turn against the Danes, Ethelred had a right to require; and steel my father was ready to pay. But Ethelred demanded gold, and the Lord of Ivarsdale would not stoop to bribe. Nor has it been proven that his policy was wrong," he added under his breath.

Then there was no longer any doubt concerning the position of Ethelred's son. He said with deliberate emphasis, "The only policy which concerns those of your station is obedience."

If there was enough of the old free blood left in the King's thanes to redden their cheeks, that was all there was. But while they stood in silence, a mutter ran like a growl through the ranks of yeomen; the gaze they bent upon their leader had in it almost the force of a command.

He was young, their chief, too young for impassivity. Despite himself, his hands trembled with excitement. But there was no tremor in his words.

"We of Ivarsdale do not profess such obedience, King Edmund. That is for thanes and for the unfree, who owe their all to your generosity. Our land we hold as our fathers held it — from God's bounty and the might of our swords. When we have paid the three taxes of fort-building and bridge-building and field-service, we have paid all that we owe to the State."

At last they stood defined, the first of the feudal lords and the last of the odal-born men. Even through the King's loftiness it was suddenly borne in that, behind the insignificance of the revolt, loomed a mighty principle, mighty enough to merit force. For the first time he stooped to a threat, though still it was tinged with scorn.

"I observe that the men of your race have not been of great importance in the land. It appears that

Ethelred was able to do without the rebel Lord of Ivarsdale."

"I admit that he was able to lose his crown without him," the rebel's son retorted swiftly.

The King's wounded dignity bled in his cheeks; he was stung into a movement that brought him to his feet.

"This is insufferable!" he cried.

It was evident that the crisis had come. While the Etheling faced him with a defiance that in its utter abandon was a little mad, a sensation as of bracing muscles and setting teeth went around the group. Several of the thanes laid their hands upon their swords. And the half-dozen ealdormen present bent toward one another in hasty consultation. At an almost imperceptible sign from the old cniht, the henchmen made a noiseless step nearer their master. There were not more than a dozen of them, but behind them loomed some two-score yeomen-soldiers, with a score more in the brush at their back; and the faces of all told more plainly than words what it would mean to attack them.

But the blood of Cerdic, once fired, burned too rapidly for policy. Edmund's jaw was set in savage menace as he turned and beckoned to his guard. Had he spoken the words on his lips, there is little doubt what his order would have been.

Interruption came from an unexpected quarter. Even as his lips were opening, that white taloned hand reached out of the shadow and touched his arm.

"Most royal lord! If it may be permitted me?" Earl Edric said swiftly.

His voice was very low, and every roughness had been filed away until it flowed like oil. Upon the King's wounded temper it appeared to fall as softly as drops of healing balm. With his mouth still set, he paused and bent his ear. There was a murmur of whispered words.

What they were no one ever knew, and each man had a different theory; but their result was plain to all. Slowly Edmund's knitted brows unravelled; slowly his mouth relaxed into its wonted curves. At last he had regained all his lofty composure and turned back.

"Lord of Ivarsdale, I am not rich of time, and my present need is too great to spare any of it to the chastising of rebellious boys. Go back to your toy kingdom, and lord it over your serfs until I find leisure to teach you who is master." Making a disdainful gesture of dismissal, he turned with deliberate grace and entered into conversation with the Mercian.

At the moment, it is likely that the young noble would have preferred arrest. The utter scorn of word and act lashed the blood to his cheeks and the tears to his eyes. With boyish passion, he snatched the sword from its sheath, and breaking it in pieces across his knee, flung the fragments clinking into the dead embers.

But if he had hoped to provoke an answer, it was in vain; the King deigned him no further notice. Re-

suming his seat, Edmund continued to talk quietly with the Earl, a half-smile playing about his complacent chin.

The old cniht bent forward and whispered in his chief's ear: "Make haste, Lord Sebert; they will be cheering in a moment, the churls; so pleased are they at the thought of going home. Hasten with your retiring."

It was a clever appeal. Forgetting, for the moment, humiliation in responsibility, the young leader whirled to his men. A gesture, a muttered order, and they were drawing back among the trees in silent retreat. A few steps more, and the bushes had blotted out the Ironside and his thanes.

CHAPTER XI

WHEN MY LORD COMES HOME FROM WAR

> One's own house is best,
> Small though it be;
> At home is every one his own master.
> Bleeding at heart is he
> Who has to ask
> For food at every mealtide.
>
> HÁVAMÁL.

SLOWLY the bleak light warmed into golden radiance, and the touch of dawn strung the scattered bird-notes into a chain of joyous song. Passing at last from the forest shades, the men of Ivarsdale came out into the grassy lane-like road that wound away over the Middlesex hills.

The Destroyer had not passed this way, it seemed, for the oat-fields stretched before them in unbroken silvery sheen; and the straight young corn dared to rustle its green ribbons boastfully. Fowls still uncaptured crowed lustily in adjacent barnyards; and now

and again, sweet as echoes from elfin horns, came the tinkling music of cow-bells. Here and there, the little shock-headed boys who were driving their charges afield paused knee-deep in rosy clover to watch the band ride by.

"Yon must be a mighty warrior," they whispered as they stared at the sober young leader. "Take notice how his eyes gaze straight ahead, as though he were seeking more people to overcome." And they spoke enviously of the red-cloaked page who sat on the croup of the leader's white charger.

"See the sword he wears in his gay clothes. Likely he also has been in battle. He must needs be happy who can strike out into the world like that." Envying, they gazed after him until the horses' hoofs threw up a yellow wall between.

They would have opened their wide mouths wider had they known that the red-cloaked page was looking wistfully at them and their kine and the nodding clover.

"It must be very enjoyable to wander all day in the peace of the meadows and hear nothing louder than cow-bells," she was thinking. "It is good to see creatures that no man is stabbing or doing harm to."

Through warm sunshine, tempered by fresh breezes, they came yet deeper into the drowsy farmland. Gradually the yeomen-soldiers, who had been wrangling over the mystery of Edric's actions, dropped one by one into lazy silence, or set their tongues to whistling cleverly turned answers to the bird-calls in the hedges.

Another mile, and from somewhere in the fields came the swinging chant of a ploughman, as he turned the soil between the rows of rustling corn, —

> "Hail, Mother Earth, thou feeder of folk!
> Be thou growing, by goodness of God,
> Filled with fodder, the folk to feed."

Like the unbinding of a spell, the words fell upon the farmer-soldiers. Dropping every other topic, they began to argue over the crops; and after that they could not pass a harmless calf tethered to a crab-tree that they did not quarrel over the breed, nor start a drove of grunting swine out of the mast but they must lay wagers on the weight.

Running wild in the animation, it was not long before the clamor caught up with the Etheling where he rode before them in sober reflection. He smiled faintly as he caught the burden of the disjointed phrases.

" . . . Twelve stone; I will peril my head upon it!" . . . "Yorkshire, I tell you, Yorkshire." . . . "A fortnight? It will be ready in a week, or I have never grown barley corn!"

"I do not believe that a tree-toad can change color more easily," he observed to the old cniht who rode at his side. "That Englishmen are not stout fighters, no man can say, but the love of it is not in their breasts; while with Northmen —"

"With Northmen," Morcard added, "to fight is to eat."

Another faint smile touched Sebert's mouth as he glanced over his shoulder at the red-cloaked boy. "After seeing this sprout, that is easy to believe. Except that time alone when a two-year-old colt kicked me on the head, I have never had my life threatened by so young a thing."

He grew grave again as his glance rested on his captive. "I want you to tell me something," he said presently. "You were Canute's page; I saw that you accompanied him in battle. I want you to tell me what he is like in his temper."

"It would be more easy to tell you what he is unlike," Randalin answered slowly; "for in no way whatever is he like your King Edmund." She sat awhile in silence, her eyes absently following the course of the wind over a slope of bending grain. At the foot, it caught a clump of willow-trees so that they flashed with hidden silver and tossed their slender arms like dancers. "I think this is the difference, to tell it shortly," she said at last; "while it sometimes happens that Canute is driven by necessity or evil counsels to act deceitfully toward others, he is always honest in his own mind; while your Edmund, — I think he lies to himself also."

Morcard gave out a dry chuckle. "By Saint Cuthbert," he muttered, "too much has not been told concerning the sharpness of children!"

But the Etheling made no answer whatever. After he had ridden a long time staring away across the fields, he met the old man's eyes gravely.

"It is not alone because I am sore under his tongue, Morcard. Were he what I had thought him, I would remain quiet under harder words. But he is not worth enduring from; there is not enough good in him to outweigh the evil."

Old Morcard said thoughtfully: "The tree of Cerdic has borne many nuts with prickly rinds in former times, but there has been wont to be good meat inside. Since Ethelred, I have been in fear that the tree is dying at the root."

They swung over another piece of the road in silence, when the young man started up and shook himself impatiently.

"Wel-a-way! What use to think of it? For the present, at least, I am a lordless man. Let us speak of the defences we must begin to raise against Edmund's coming."

While they discussed watch-towers and barriers, the horses took them along at a swinging pace. The heath-clad upland over which they were passing sloped into another fertile valley, through which a lily-padded stream ran between rows of drooping willows. Suddenly the Lord of Ivarsdale broke off with an exclamation.

"It was not in my mind that we could see the old forked elm from here. Hey, comrades!" he called over his shoulder. "Yonder — to the left — the old landmark! Do you see?" His glance, as it came back, took in his captive. "The first bar of your cage, my hawk. Yonder is the first boundary of Ivarsdale."

Every man started up in his saddle, and the cheers they had held back upon leaving camp burst forth now with added zest. Peering over her captor's shoulder, Randalin looked forward anxiously.

Below the plain in whose centre the old elm held up its blasted top to be silvered by the sun, the land dipped abruptly toward the river, to rise beyond in a long low hill. Rolling green meadows lay at its foot, and warm brown fields dotted with thatched farmhouses; and its sides were checkered with patches of woodland and stretches of golden barley. Just below the crest, the tower of the Lords of Ivarsdale reared its gray walls above the surrounding greenery. Far away, a speck through the dark foliage, the great London road gleamed white; but wooded hills made a sheltering hedge between, and all around spread the great beech forest that fostered the markmen's herds. It was a kingdom to itself, with the light slanting warmly upon its fertile slopes and the forest standing like a strong army at its back.

Because it was so peacefully lovely, and because of her utter weariness, tears welled up under the girl's heavy lids as she looked.

She said unsteadily, "Saw I never a fairer cage, lord."

But the Etheling's eager glance had travelled on; for the first time the sun was shining out brightly in his face.

"The sight has more cheer than has wine," he said. "I cannot comprehend my folly in wanting to leave it.

To live one's own master on one's own land, that is the only life!" He looked back at the yeomen with a sudden smile. "Noise!" he ordered. "Cheer again! it expresses the state of my feelings. And let your horn sound merrily, Kendred, that they may know we are coming."

Amid a joyous tumult, they swept over the terrace-like plain and broke ranks around the old elm. Evidently it was the disbanding place, for the yeomen-soldiers, one and all, came crowding around their leader to press his hand and speak a parting word.

"You have fought with the sword of your tongue, chief!" . . . "as worthy a battle as when you strove against the Danes!" . . . "The spirit of the old days is not dead while you are alive, Oswald's son." . . . "None now are born thereto save you alone!" . . . "Till that time when you send for us, my chief." . . . "One eye on our ploughs and one watching for your messenger." . . . "God keep you in safety, young lord!"

In the meadows beyond the stream, little shepherd boys had heard the horn and were swarming, spider-like, over the hedges, sending up shrill shouts. And now women came running across the fields from the farmhouses, waving their aprons. More children raced behind them; and then a dozen old men, limping and hobbling on crutches and canes. A moment, and they were all over the foot-bridge and up the slope; and the sweet clamor of greetings was added to the tumult. Now it was a crowd of little brothers throwing themselves upon a big one; now a blooming lass flinging

her arms around her sweetheart's neck; and again, a farmer's little daughter leaping joyously into her father's embrace.

In the midst of it, the Lord of Ivarsdale looked around and found that Fridtjof the page was crying as though his heart would break.

"How! Tears, my Beowulf!" he said in amazement.

She was far beyond words, the girl in the page's dress; she could only bury her face deeper in her slender hands and try to control the sobs that shook her from head to foot.

But it was not long before the young man's kindness divined the source of her pain. He spoke a quick word to those behind, and waving aside those before, touched spur to the white horse. In a moment, the good steed had borne them out of the crowd and down the slope, followed only by the old cnihts and the dozen armed retainers.

As the hoofs rang hollow on the little bridge that spanned the stream, the Etheling spoke again in his voice of careless gentleness. "It is easy to enter into the sorrowfulness of your heart, youngling, and I think it no dishonor to your courage that you should mourn your kin with tears; yet I pray you to lay aside as much grief as you can. Bear in mind that no dungeon is gaping for you."

She could not speak to him yet, but when he put his hand back to feel of a strap, she bent and touched the brown fingers gratefully with her lips. The answer seemed to renew his kindly impulse.

"After all, you should not feel so strange among us," he said lightly. "Do you know that it was one of your own countrymen who built the Tower? Ivar Wide-Fathomer he was named, whence it is still called Ivarsdale. He was of the stock of Lodbrok, they say; and it is said, too, that one of his race is even now with Canute. Since Alfred, my fathers have had possession of it, but it is Danish-built, every stone. You must make believe that you are coming home." So he spun on, carelessly good-humored, as they climbed the winding hill-path.

Across the ditch and through the wide-open gate in the moss-grown palisade, and they came into a broad grassy space that was more like a lawn than a court. Ahead of them rose the massive three-storied tower, built of mighty gray stones without softening wings or adorning spires, beautiful only in its mantling ivy. From the great door in its side a crowd of serfs came running, ducking grinning salutations; and they were followed by a half-dozen old warriors. Seized by a boyish whim, their master rode past them with no more than a wave of his hand.

"If we make haste, it may be that we can take Hildelitha and Father Ingulph by surprise," he laughed, leaping down on the crumbling doorstep and pulling his captive with him.

In the tunnel-like arch of the great entrance they met another throng, but he shook them off with good-natured impatience and hurried through the great

guard-room to the winding stairs, that were cut out of the core of the massive stones. Up and across another mighty hall, and then up again, and into a great women's-room, full of looms and spinning-wheels, where a buxom English housewife and half-a-dozen red-cheeked maids were gaping over their distaffs at the tale a jolly old monk was telling between swallows of wine.

He choked in his cup when he saw who stood laughing in the doorway, and there was a great screaming and scrambling among his audience. Knocking over her spinning-wheel to get to him, the woman Hildelitha threw her arms around her young lord's neck and gave him a hearty smack on either cheek; while the fat monk sputtered blessings between his paroxysms of coughing, and the six blooming girls made a screaming circle around them.

Though he endured it amiably enough, the Ethelling appeared in some haste to offer a diversion. He evaded a second embrace by turning and beckoning to his shrinking captive.

"Save a little of your greeting for my guest, good nurse. Behold the fire-eating Dane that I have captured with my own right arm!" As the red-cloaked figure still hung back, he pulled it gently forward until the light of the notched candles fell brightly on the face, pitifully white for all its blood-stains, in the frame of tumbled black tresses.

"A Dane?" the women cried shrilly; then, with equal unanimity, burst out laughing.

Randalin drew a little nearer the Etheling's sheltering side. He said half reprovingly, half freakishly, "It would not be well for you to anger him. He is the page of Canute himself, a real Wandering Wolf, and recks not whom he attacks. He came near to spitting Oslac at the battle, and even threatened me."

"Oslac!" screamed one of the serving-maids, turning very red. "The murderous little fiend!"

"He deserves to have his neck wrung!" two more cried out.

And Father Ingulph cleared his throat loudly. "Well-fitting is your charity both toward my teachings and your heart, my son; and yet — Discretion is the mother of other virtues. To bring one of those roving children of Satan into a Christian household will lay upon me a responsibility which — which —" He paused to take a mouthful of wine and eye the stranger over the goblet rim with much disfavor.

While the maids whispered excitedly in one another's ears, Hildelitha began to sniff behind her apron.

"I do not see why you wanted to bring him home, Lord Sebert. You know that Danes are odious to me since my husband, of holy memory, fell under their axes — most detestable — Yet I would not anger you, my honey-sweet lord," she broke off abruptly.

For the Lord of Ivarsdale had suddenly grown very stiff and grave; there was something curiously haughty in the quiet distinctness of his words.

"I have brought the boy home by reason of the

King's command that he be held in safety — and because it was my pleasure to succor him. And I have fetched him up here in order that you should supply his needs, being distressed for want of food and drink and healing salves. I am not pleased that you should meet my wishes in so light and cold a manner. I desire your love will, as is becoming, receive him kindly and charitably."

He raised his hand as the pertest of the maids would have answered him, and there followed an uncomfortable pause. Then seven gowns swept the reed-strewn floor as seven courtesies fell, and Hildelitha thrust out her palm to give the pert maid a resounding box on the ear.

"You have heard your master, hussy! Why do you not exert yourself to bring food? Elswitha, if you do not want the mate to that, fetch the salve out of my chest."

In an instant all was confusion; under cover of it the fat monk returned to his cup and the young master walked quietly to the door.

Homesick and heartsick, the waif in the page's dress was left facing the unfriendly glances. Even in her bravest days, she had never known what it was to be disliked, and now — ! Suddenly she limped after her friend and caught at his cloak.

"Let me go with you," she cried. "I beseech it of you! I want not their service."

After a moment, the Etheling threw his arm protectingly around the boyish figure.

"I do not blame you, poor youngling," he said. "I was wrong to treat you as a child when you were bred up as a man. You shall have a bed in the closet off my chamber, and they shall not enter except as you will it. And you shall eat off my plate and drink from my cup. Come!"

CHAPTER XII

THE FOREIGN PAGE

Early should rise
He who has few workers,
And go his work to see to;
Greatly is he retarded
Who sleeps the morn away;
Wealth half depends on energy.

HÁVAMÁL.

IT was August, when Mother Earth had nearly completed her task of providing for her children, and the excitement of a mighty work drawing to its close was in the air; when the sun-warmed stillness was a-quiver with the pulse of growing things coming to their strength, and every cloudless day held in its golden heart a song of exultation. The grassy space around the Tower, which was wont to be thronged with joyous idlers, was to-day almost deserted. A single groom lounged in the shade of the wide-spreading trees as he kept a lazy eye on the croppings of two saddled horses, and an endless chain of fagot-laden serfs plodded joy-

lessly across the open. On one side of the great entrance arch a half-dozen of the manor poor gabbled and basked in the sun while they waited to receive their daily dole of food; on the other, a dark-locked foreign page sat on the mossy step abiding the coming of his master.

Leaning back with one arm bent carelessly behind his head and one hand caressing a shaggy hound that pressed against his knee, the boy's far-away gaze was designed to intimate his haughty oblivion to the castle-world in general and the movements of the almsfolk in particular. Seeing which, the people on the other side of the step had laid aside any reserve they might have felt and were indulging their curiosity with cheerful freedom.

"Six weeks he has been here, and this is the first good look I have had at him," the buzzing whispers ran. "It is said that they were obliged to catch him between shields before they could take him." . . . "Such hair on a Dane is more rare than a white crow." . . . "I believe no good of any one with locks of that color." . . . "Tibby, the weaving-woman, says he is skilful in magic." . . . "It is by reason of that, that he has become my lord's darling." . . . "Why is he not in the hall, then, while the ethel-born is sitting at table?" . . . "Perhaps his luck is beginning to fail him." . . . "Perhaps he has fallen out of favor."

The two old men who offered these last suggestions chuckled with malicious enjoyment, and two of the old women mumbled with their toothless gums as

though tasting sweet morsels; but the third drew herself up with a kind of grotesque coquetry.

"You can tell by the green silk of his tunic that he is of some quality," she reproved them. "Danishmen are ever the ones to adorn themselves. It occurs to my mind how, in Edgar's time, when I was a girl, one was quartered in my father's house. He changed his raiment once a day and bathed every Sunday. I used to comb his yellow hair when I took in his ale, of a morning." Long after her voice had passed into a rattle, she stood in a simpering revery, her palsied hands resting heavily upon her stick, her blinking eyes fixed on the picturesque young foreigner musing in the sunshine.

Then the voice of the steward sounded sharply in the archway. There was an eager catching up of bags and baskets, a shuffling forward of unsteady feet, and the goody came out of her day-dream to throw herself into the strife over a jar of peppered broth.

The Danish page bent to pillow a very red cheek on the soft cushion of the dog's head, then drew back and straightened himself stiffly as a strapping serving-lass, flagon-laden, came out of the door behind him. She saw the motion and looked down with a teasing laugh. "Aha, young Fridtjof! How do you like being sent to cool your heels on the doorstep while your master eats? What! I think that the next time you thrust your foot out to trip me up as I hand my lord his ale, you will attend to keeping it under your stool."

Young Fridtjof regarded her with a kind of righteous indignation. "And I think that the next time you will look where you are going, even if it happen that it is Lord Sebert's ale you are bearing. Silly jades, that cannot come nigh him without biting your lips or sparkling your eyes! I wonder he does not clap masks over your faces."

"And I wonder he does not clap rods to your back," the lass retorted with sudden spite. She flounced past him down the step, on her way to the great lead-roofed storehouse that flanked the forest side of the Tower.

The boy looked after her sternly. "It is likely that you will be less pert of tongue after I tell what I found out in the corn-bins yesterday," he said.

The maid whirled. "What did you find out, you mischief-full brat?"

He continued to stroke the dog's head in dignified silence.

"If you mean the — the brown-cloaked beggar, let me inform you that that is naught."

Busying himself with pulling burrs from the hound's ears, the page began to hum softly.

She came a step nearer, and her voice wheedled. "It was only that he was distressed for want of drink, poor fellow, and followed me into the storehouse when he saw me go in to fill the master's flagon. It was naught but a swallow. My lord would be the last to grudge a harmless body —"

"Harmless?" the page said sternly. "Did I not hear him tell you the same as that he was an English spy?"

The girl abandoned the last shred of her dignity, to come and stand before him, nervously fingering her apron. "For the dear saints' sake, let no one hear you say that, good Fridtjof! Alas, how you have got it twisted! He is an Englishman who bent his head for food in the evil days. And now they that bought him will not set him loose, so he has cast off their yoke and fled to the Danes to get freedom and fortune. He was on his way to join your people when he stopped to beg food. I could not be so hard of heart as to refuse, though Hildelitha's hand would be hot about my ears did she suspect it. Say that you will hold your tongue, sweet lad, and I will make boot with anything you like."

He was very deliberate about it, the page, pursing his rosy mouth into any number of judicial puckers; but at last he conceded, "Now, since you know for certain that he is not one of Edmund's spies, — and you are so penitent, as is right," — pausing, he regarded her severely, — "if I do promise, will you make a bargain to put an end to your silly behavior toward my lord? Will you undertake to deliver his dishes into my hands, and leave it for me to pass his cup?"

"Yes, in truth; by Father Ingulph's book!" the maid cried, wringing her hands.

The page made her a magnanimous gesture. "In that case I will not be so mean as to refuse you," he consented. And he sat smiling to himself in sly content after she had hurried away.

Emboldened by that smile, the dog suddenly laid aside his soberness of demeanor. Pouncing upon a

fagot which had fallen from one of the loads, he brought it in his teeth, with shining eyes and much frantic tail-wagging, and rubbed it against his friend's knee. He had not miscalculated. The boy's smile deepened easily into a laugh, and he leaped to his feet to accept the challenge. Seizing the stick, he put all the strength of his lithesome body into an effort to make off with it, while the great hound braced himself, with a rapture of rumbling growls and short delighted barks. So they tussled, back and forth, this way and that, amid a merry tumult of barking and laughter, — such a tumult that neither heard the steps that both were waiting for, when at last those steps came briskly through the archway. The first they knew of it, the Lord of Ivarsdale was standing under the lintel, chatting with those who came behind him.

With lips yet parted by their breathless laughter, the lad straightened quickly from his sport, and stood shaking back his tumbling curls and mopping his hot face, in which the rich color glowed through the tanned skin like the velvety red on a golden peach. When, for one flashing instant, they encountered a keen glance from the young lord, the color deepened, and the iris-blue eyes suddenly brimmed over with mischievous sparkles; then the black lashes were lowered demurely, and the page, retreating to his place beside the step, signified only deference and decorum.

Followed by old Morcard and the fat monk, the Etheling descended from the doorway and stood on the broad step, shading his eyes from the glare of brilliant

light while he looked about him with evident pleasure in the fairness of the day.

"Now is the time to lay by a store of sweet memories against the stress of winter weather," he said. "Whither do you go to harvest the sunshine, father?"

The monk pulled his round red face to a devout length. "Why, there is a good woman at the other end of the dale, my son, that labors under a weakness of her limbs; and I have bethought me that it would be a Christian act to fetch her this holy relique I wear about my neck, that she may lay it upon the afflicted members and perhaps, aided by my exhortations, experience some relief."

"If the question may be permitted me, whither do you betake yourself, my lord?" the old cniht asked.

With the light wand he carried, the young man made a gesture quite around the horizon. "Everywhere and nowhere. After I have been to see what they are doing with that portion of the palisade which I bade them repair as soon as they had finished the barrier, I am —"

"That is something that had clean fallen out of my mind to tell you, Lord Sebert," Morcard spoke up hastily. "Yesterday, before you had got in from hunting, Kendred of Hazelford came, as spokesman for the rest, to say that inasmuch as the Barn Month is well begun, it will not be possible for them to labor more upon the building; and, by your leave, they will put

off this, which is not pressing, until after the time of the harvest."

It was several moments before the Etheling spoke, and then his voice was noticeably deliberate. "Oh!" he said, "so they ask my leave, but stop at their pleasure?"

"My lord!" — the old man looked at him in surprise — "they act only according to custom. Surely you would not have them neglect the harvest, which waits no man's leisure, to put to their hands as laborers when there is no present need, now that they have completed the barriers by the stream? What present harm because the drain off the hill has rotted the palisade? All of that part is toward the forest. How? Do you expect some Grendel of the March to fall upon us from that direction?"

The Etheling smiled against his will. "Our foe would needs be a Grendel to reach us from that side." He struck the wand sharply against his riding-boots. "Oh, it is not that I think the work so pressing."

"In the Fiend's name, what then is the cause of your distemper?" Father Ingulph inquired impatiently, as he finished the girding-up of his robes and picked up his staff preparatory to setting forth.

After a moment, the young noble began to laugh. "Why, to tell it frankly, methinks it is more temper than distemper. That they should take it upon them to decide how much of my order is necessary —" He let a pause finish for him, and suddenly he turned with a flourish of gay defiance: "I will tell you how I am

going to spend my morning, Morcard. I am going to ride over every acre that is under my hand and see how much I can spare for loan-land. And when I have found out, I will rent every furlong to boors who shall be bound to pay me service, not when it best pleases them, but whensoever I stand in need of it."

Rubbing his chin, the monk heard him in silence; but the old warrior grew momentarily grave. "Take care that you seem not over proud, young lord. It is in such a mood that Edmund creates thanes."

It may be that the Etheling's eyes widened for an instant, but directly after he laughed with gay perverseness. "Is it?" he said. "Then, for the first time in six weeks, I see that the Ironside is cunning in thought."

Shaking his head, Father Ingulph moved down the step. "Nay, if you are in that humor, my son, I waste no breath. Speed you well, and may you wax in wisdom!" With a gesture, half paternal, half respectful, he betook himself across the grass to the gate.

Old Morcard turned and stepped up into the doorway, from which he looked down indulgently upon his laughing master. "It happened formerly, Lord Sebert, that I knew how to command your earnestness, and that speedily; but that time has long gone by. Methinks I can accomplish more among the watchmen upon the platform. By your leave, my lord!." Bowing, he disappeared in the dark tunnel of the archway, and the Etheling was left alone save for the graceful

figure awaiting him beside the step. The instant he moved, it sprang forward.

"Lord, is it your wish that I get the horses?"

As the old man had looked down upon the young one, so now the young man stood looking down upon the boy, regarding him with tolerant severity. "You most mischief-full elf!" he said. "It would be treating you deservedly were I to leave you at home."

It did not appear that the lad was seriously cast down; a betraying dimple came out and played in his cheek, though his mouth struggled for gravity. "That is unjustly spoken, lord," he protested. "Did I not bear my punishment with befitting penitence?"

"Penitence!" the Etheling gave one of the small ears a menacing pull as he descended to the grass. "What! Do you think I did not see your antics with the dog? You made a jest of the matter, you pixie!"

The page sobered. "I think it great luck that I could, Lord Sebert! Your servants were eager in making a jest of me when they got the courage from your displeasure."

But Lord Sebert reached out the wand and gave him a gentle stroke across the shoulders.

"Take that for your foolishness," he said lightly. "What matters their babble when you know how safe you sit in my favor?"

Through lowered lashes the boy stole him a glance, half mischievous, half coaxing. "How safe, lord?" he murmured.

But the Etheling only laughed at him, as he drew up his long riding-boots and readjusted his belt. "Safe enough so that I forgive you some dozen floggings a day, you imp; and choose you for my comrade when I should be profiting by the companionship of your betters. Waste no more golden moments on whims, youngling, but go bid them fetch the horses, and we will have another day of blithe wandering."

Blithe they were, in truth, as they cantered through shaded lanes and daisied meadows, nothing too small to be of interest or too slight to give them pleasure. An orchard of pears, whose ripening they were watching with eager mouths, a group of colts almost ready for the saddle, — for the young master the fascination of ownership gave them all a value; while another fascination made his companion hang on his least word, respond to his lightest mood.

By grassy commons and rolling meadows sweet with clustering haycocks, they came at last to the crest of the hill that guarded the eastern end of the dale. The whole round sweep of the horizon lay about them in an unbroken chain of ripening vineyards and rich timber-land, of grain-fields and laden orchards; not one spot that did not make glorious pledges to the harvest time. Drinking its fairness with his eyes, the lord of the manor sighed in full content. "When I see how fine a thing it is to cause wealth to be where before was nothing, I cannot understand how I once thought to find my pleasure only in destroying," he

said. "Next month, when the barley beer is brewed, we will have a harvest feast plentiful enough to flesh even your bones, you bodkin!"

The Danish page laughed as he dodged the plaguing wand. "It is true that you owe something to my race, lord. He had great good sense, the Wide-Fathomer, to stretch his strips of oxhide around this dale and turn it into an odal."

"Nay now, it was Alfred who had sense to take it away from him," the Etheling teased.

But the boy shook back his long tresses in airy defiance. "Then will Canute be foremost in wisdom, for soon he will get it back, together with all England. Remember who got the victory last week at Brentford, lord."

In the midst of his exulting, a cloud came over the young Englishman's smile. "I would I knew the truth concerning that," he said slowly. "The man who passes to-day says one thing; whoso comes to-morrow tells another story. Yet since Canute is once more free to beset London —" He did not finish, and for a while it appeared as though he did not see the sunlit fields his eyes were resting on.

But suddenly the boy broke in upon him with a burst of stifled laughter. "Look, lord! In yonder field, behind the third haycock!"

The moment that he had complied, laughter banished the Etheling's meditations. Cozily ensconced in the soft side of a haycock was Father Ingulph, a couple of jovial harvesters sprawled beside him, a fat skin of

ale in his hands on its way to his mouth. As the pair on the hilltop looked down, one of the trio began to bellow out a song that bore no resemblance whatever to a hymn. Keeping under cover of the bushes, the eavesdroppers laughed with malicious enjoyment.

"But I will make him squirm for that!" the Etheling vowed. "I will tell him that your paganism has made spells over me so that I cannot tell a holy relique from an ale-skin; and a bedridden woman looks to me like two strapping yeomen. I will, I swear it!"

"And I shall be able to hold it against him as a shield, the next time he is desirous to fret me about taking a new belief," the boy rejoiced.

But presently Sebert's remarks began to take a new tone. "They have the appearance of relishing what they have in that skin," he observed first. And then, "I should not mind putting my own teeth into that bread-and-cheese." And at last, "By Saint Swithin, lad, I think they have more sense than we, that linger a half-hour's ride from food with a noonday sun standing in the sky! It is borne in upon me that I am starving."

Backing his horse out of the brush, he was putting him about in great haste, when the boy leaped in his stirrups and clapped his hands.

"Lord, we need not be a half-hour from food! Yonder, across the stubble, is a farmhouse. If you would consent that I might use your name, then would I ride thither and get their best, and serve it to you here in the elves' own feast-hall."

The answer was a slap on the green shoulders that nearly tumbled their owner from the saddle. "Now, I was right to call you elf, for you have more than human cleverness!" the Etheling cried gayly. "Do so, by all means, dear lad; and I promise in return that I will tell every puffed-up dolt at home that you are the blithest comrade who ever fitted himself to man's moods. There, if that contents you, give wings to your heels!"

CHAPTER XIII

WHEN MIGHT MADE RIGHT

Now may we understand
That men's wisdom
And their devices
And their councils
Are like naught
'Gainst God's resolve.

SAXON CHRONICLE.

THAT difference that, somewhere beyond the hills, men were fighting and castles were burning? At Ivarsdale, in the shelter and cheer of the lord's great hall, the feast of the barley beer was at its height. While one set of serfs bore away the remnants of roast and loaf and sweetmeat, another carried around the brimming horns; and to the sound of cheers and hand-clapping, the gleeman moved forward toward the harp that awaited him by the fireside.

Where the glow lay rosiest, the young lord sat in the great raised chair, jesting with his Danish page who knelt on the step at his side. Now the boy's an-

swering provoked him to laughter, and he put out a hand and tousled the thick curls in his favorite caress. One of the tresses caught in his jewelled ring; and as he bent to unfasten it, he stared at the wavy mass in lazy surprise. It was as soft and rich as the breast of a blackbird, and the fire had laid over it a sheen of rainbow lights.

"Never did I think there could be any black hair so alluring," he said involuntarily.

He could not see how the face under the dark veil grew suddenly as bright as though the sun had risen in it. And the lad said, rather breathlessly, "I wonder at your words, lord. You know that such hair is the curse of black elves."

Leaning back in his chair, the Etheling shook his head in whimsical obstinacy. "Not so, not so," he persisted. "It has to it more lustre than has yellow. My lady-love shall have just such locks."

He had a glimpse like the flash of a bluebird's wing in the sun, as the page glanced up at him, and the sight of a face grown suddenly rose-red. Then the boy turned shyly, and slipping back to his cushion on the step, nestled himself against the chair-arm with a sigh that was almost pathetic in its happiness.

Like a quieting hand, the first of the mellow chords fell upon the noise of the revel. The servants bearing away the dishes began to tread the rushes on tiptoe, and a dozen frowns rebuked any clatter. Through the hush, the gleeman began to sing the "Romance of King Offa," the king who married a

wood nymph for dear love's sake. It began with the wooing and the winning, out in the leafy greenwood amid bird-voices and murmuring brooks; but before long the enmity of the queen-mother entered, with jarring discords, to send the lovers through bitter trials. Lord and page, man and maid and serf, strained eye and ear toward the harper's tattered figure. So breathless grew the listening stillness that the crackling of the fire became an annoyance. What matter that outside an autumn wind was howling through the forest and stripping the leaves through the vines? Within sound of the mellow harp-music it was balmiest springtime, as the castlefolk followed the gleeman over the hills and dales of a flowering dream-world.

For a space after he had finished, the silence remained unbroken, then gave way only to an outburst of applause. And one did even better than applaud. Bending forward, his beautiful face quite radiant with his pleasure, the curly-headed page pulled a golden ring from his pouch and tossed it into the harper's lap.

As he caught the largess, the man's mouth broadened. "I thank you for your good-will, fair stripling," he returned. "May you find as true a love when your time comes to go a-wooing."

The maids tittered, while the men guffawed, and a richer glow came into the cheeks of Fridtjof the page. Suddenly his iris-blue eyes were daringly a-sparkle.

"The spirits will have forgot your wish before that time comes," he laughed, "for I vow that I will raise a beard or ever I woo a maiden."

Above the mirth that followed rose the voice of the brawniest of the henchmen, passing his judgment on the ballad. "Now that is my own desire of songs," he declared. "That was worth possessing, — the love of that lass. A sweetheart who will cleave to your side when your fortune is most severe, and despise every good because she has not you also, she is the filly to yoke with. Drink to the wood maiden, comrades, bare feet and wild ways and all!" Swinging up his horn, he drained off the toast at a draught. "Give us a mistress like that, my lord," he cried merrily, "and we will hold Ivarsdale for her though all of Edmund's men batter at the doors."

Laughing, they all looked up where the young master leaned in his chair, watching the revels with a smile of idle good-humor. All except the blue-eyed page; he bent forward instead, so that his long locks fell softly about his face.

The Lord of Ivarsdale shook his head indolently against the cushion. "No wood lass for me, friend Celric," he said. "The lady of my love shall be a high-born maid who knows no more of the world's roughness than I of woman's ways. Nor shall she follow me at all, but stay modestly at home with her maids and keep herself gentle and fair against my return. Deliver me from your sun-browned, boy-bred wenches!"

"I am consenting to that, lord!" a voice cried from the benches; and a hubbub of conflicting opinions arose. Only the page neither spoke or moved.

The henchman would not be downed; again his voice rose above the others. "In soft days, my lord, in soft days, it might easily be so. But bear in mind such times as these, when grief happens to a man oftener than joy. Methinks your lily-fair lady would swoon at the sight of your blood; and tears would be the best answer you would get, should you seek to draw comfort out of her."

White as a star at dawn, the page's face was raised while his wide eyes hung on his master's; and from the little reed wound between his brown fingers, the juice began to ooze slowly as though some silent force were crushing the life out of its green heart.

But the young noble laughed with gay scorn: "Tears would be in all respects a better answer than I should deserve, should I whimper faint-hearted words into a maiden's ear. What folly-fit do you speak in, fellow? What! Do you think I would wed another comrade like yourself, or a playfellow like this youngster?" Ever so gently his foot touched the boyish form on the step. "It is something quite different from either of you that is my desire; something that is as much higher as the stars are above these candles."

Disputing and agreeing, the clamor rose anew, and the Etheling turned to his favorite with a jest. But the page was no longer in his place. He had risen to his feet and was standing with his head flung back like one in pain, both hands up tearing the tunic away from his throat. Sebert bent toward him with a question on his lips.

He forgot the query before he could speak it, however, for at that moment there was a sound of hurried steps on the stone stairs, and one of the armed watchmen from the top of the Tower burst into the room.

"Lord," he gasped, "some one is upon us! We thought first it was naught but the noise of the wind — then Elward saw a light. We swear they came not over the bridge, yet —"

His words were cut short by a horn-blast from the darkness, loud and clear above the whistling wind. Though only one woman screamed out Edmund's name, it is probable that the same thought was in every mind. Jests and laughter died on the lips that bore them, and with one accord the men turned in their seats to watch their master.

His face had sobered as he listened; before the first echo had died away he had spoken swiftly to the fellow at his side. "Celric, get you down to the guard at the gate and inquire into the meaning of that."

When the henchman had left, he began a sharp questioning of the sentinel, and the noise did not begin again. Whispering, the women drew together like herded sheep; and the men left their barley beer, to stand in little groups, muttering in one another's ears. An old bowman took his weapon down from the wall and set silently to work to restring it.

In the quiet, the tap of the man's feet upon the steps was audible long before he reached the waiting

roomful. Every eye fastened itself upon the curtained doorway.

Swinging back, the arras disclosed a face full of amazement. "Lord," the man said, "it is Danes! None know how many or how they came there. And their chief has sent you a messenger."

"Danes!" For the first time in the history of Ivarsdale, the word was spoken with an accent of relief.

The page turned from the fire with a cry of bitter rejoicing: "If it is Canute, I will go to him!"

In the revulsion of his feelings, the Etheling laughed outright. "Since it is not Edmund, I care not if it be the Evil One himself; and it cannot be he, for Canute is in Mercia." He rose and faced them cheerily. "Lay aside your uneasiness, friends; it is likely only such another band as we put to flight last month, that hopes to surprise us into some weakness. Let the signal fires blaze to warn the churls, while we amuse ourselves with the messenger. To-morrow we will chase them so far over the hills that they will never find their way back again."

Beckoning to Morcard, he began to consult him concerning the most effective arrangement of the sentinels; and there was a muffled clatter of weapons as men went to and fro with hasty steps. At a word from the steward, the women went softly from the room and up the winding stairs to their quarters, the rustling of their dresses coming back with ghostly stealthiness.

When all was ready the messenger was brought in between guards. Wrapped in dirty sheepskins, he

swaggered to the centre of the room, and the light that fell on his tanned face showed a scar running the full length of his cheek. With his first glance, the Lord of Ivarsdale uttered an exclamation.

"Now, by Saint Mary, I have seen you before, fellow! Were you not the leader of the band we drove away last month?"

The Scar-Cheek laughed impudently. "I will not conceal it; yet I did not know that my beauty was so showy. The chief was wise to send Brown-Cloak to do the spying."

"Brown-Cloak! The beggar?" was cried all down the hall.

But the messenger's eyes had fallen on the black-haired boy, who stood staring at him from the fireside. His wide mouth opened in astonishment. "The King's ward? Here is a happening!" he ejaculated. "If I am not much mistaken, Canute will be glad to find this out. It was his belief that you had got your death-blow at Scoerstan, and he took it ill."

The King's ward made no other answer than to regard him with a strange mixture of attention and aversion; but the Etheling reached out and pushed the boy farther behind the great chair.

"Fridtjof Frodesson is my captive and no longer concerns you," he said briefly. "Give him no further thought, but come to your message."

The swaggering assurance of the man's laugh was more offensive than rudeness would have been. "If I say that we will shortly set him free, I shall not be

going very wide from my message. My errand hither is that I bring word from Rothgar Lodbroksson to surrender the Tower."

The page uttered a little cry, and his lord raised a hand mechanically to impose silence; but no one else seemed able to speak or to move. From the master in his chair to the serf by the door, they stared dumbfounded at the messenger.

He, on his part, appeared to realize all at once that the time for formality had come. Pitching his cloak higher on his shoulders, he fastened his eyes on a hole in the tapestry behind the Etheling's chair and began monotonously to recite his lesson: "Rothgar, the son of Lodbrok, sends you greeting, Sebert Oswaldsson; and it is his will that you surrender to him the odal and Tower of Ivarsdale; as is right, because the odal was created and the Tower was built by Ivar Vidfadmi, who was the first son of Lodbrok and the father's father's father of my chief—" In spite of himself, he was obliged to stop to take in breath.

In the pause, the page bent toward his master, his face alight with a sudden fierce triumph. "Lord," he whispered, "you can never get out! You are caught as though they had you in a trap!"

Astounded, Sebert drew back to stare at him. "Fridtjof! It is not possible that you are unfaithful to me!"

The boy's only answer was to drop down upon the step and bury his face in his hands. And now the messenger had recovered his wind and his place.

"Since the time of Alfred," he went on, "my chief and his kin have been kept out of the property by your stock and you; yet because he does not wish to look mean, he offers you to go out in safety with all of your housefolk, both men and women, and as much property as you can walk under, — if you go quietly and in peace." This time his inflection showed that he had finished. He turned his eyes from the hole and fastened them on the Lord of Ivarsdale, in the confidence of invincible power.

The room was so still that when a gust came in around the ill-fitting windows, the flare of the torch-flames sounded loud as the hiss of serpents.

The Etheling's voice was very deep and quiet. "If we go in peace," he repeated slowly. "And if we do not?"

The Dane shrugged his burly shoulders. "There are no terms for that. You will find it necessary to take what comes."

Again there was silence.

Sebert put his last question: "How long does the son of Lodbrok give me to consider how I am to order things?"

The man shattered the silence with his boisterous laughter. "It is not a lie about you English that you never do aught that you do not sit down first and consider, till the crews have eaten all your provisions and the timbers of your boats are rotting. When a Dane strikes, it is like the striking of lightning. So soon as you hear the thunder of his coming, that instant you

see the flashing of his weapon. My chief gives you no time at all. So long a time, he has studied out, will it take me to come in to you; so much longer to do my errand; and so much longer to get back. At the end of that time he will blow his horn, and if your gates do not fly open in obedience, he will take that for your answer."

Either the Lord of Ivarsdale had been doing some rapid thinking during the long speech, or else he was too incensed to think. Now he rose with sparks flashing from the steel of his eyes. "By Peter, he is right! I do not need even that long," he cried. "Since the Wide-Fathomer began the game, the Tower has been the prize of the strongest. Shall I flinch from a challenge? Our rights are equal; our luck shall decide. For his answer, be he reminded of his own Danish saying, that 'It is a strong bird that can take what an eagle has in his claws,' and let him get what comfort he can from that."

After his ringing tones, the unmoved voice of the messenger fell flat on the ear. "It has happened as we supposed, that you would answer unfavorably," he said as he turned. "It was seen in battle that you are a brave man. Otherwise the chief would not have thought it necessary to hew a path through the forest in order to take you by surprise." Saluting with some appearance of respect, he joined his conductors at the door and passed out of sight down the stair.

Like smoke in the wake of a firebrand, confusion rose behind him; a din of exclamations loosed on the

air and the clangor of weapons caught down from the wall. Through it, the Etheling's voice sounded strongly.

"To the palisade, all of you! They may not wait till morning. To the forest side; and keep them from it as you would keep off death!" He bent and shook the crouching page. "My armor, boy! How! Would you have me read treason in your sluggishness? My armor!"

The page started up, but it was only to stare past him and fling out his hand toward a window, where a bright light had suddenly shot athwart the darkness: "Lord, they have set fire to something!"

The voice of old Morcard rose shrill: "To the storehouses! Save the grain!"

There was a wild rush for the door; but on the threshold they were met by the shouts of watchmen hurrying from the parapets.

"Lord, the court is swarming with them!" . . . "They have cut through the palisade on the forest side!" . . . "They had brush laid ready—" . . . "Waited only for him—" . . . "Holy saints, what is the meaning of that?" . . . "Something else has taken!"

From the stairway above them came a piercing cry: "The storehouses! They have fired them from inside! The lead is melting like ice!" . . . "The grain!" . . . "The grain!"

In their midst the young lord stood in helpless fury; and the hand he had grasped around his sword-

hilt gripped it so hard that blood started under each nail. But his page bent and kissed the clenched fist with a cry of fierce exulting.

"You will never get out to find your lily-fair lady. You will never have a lady wife, lord! We shall die together."

CHAPTER XIV

HOW THE FATES CHEATED RANDALIN

> There is a mingling of affection
> Where one can tell
> Another all his mind.
>
> HÁVAMÁL.

FTER that night the deep-set windows of Ivarsdale Tower looked out upon some grim sights. The first morning it was a skirmish in the meadow beyond the foot-bridge, when the three-score farmer-soldiers came loyally to their leader's aid. Though Kendred of Hazelford marched bravely at their head, they were practically uncaptained; with any kind of weapon in their hands and no kind of armor over their homespun. What chance had they against sixty picked warriors, led by the fiercest chief of a race of chieftains? They met, and there was a moment of clash and of clangor, a moment of awful commotion; and when the whirling dust-clouds settled, the only homespun that was moving was that which was flying, sped by Danish

arrows. All the rest of the day the Tower windows looked out upon a litter of brown heaps, here and there a white face upturned or a scarf-end fluttering in the autumn wind.

Wild with helpless misery, the Lord of Ivarsdale would have charged the Berserkers with his handful of armed servants if the old cniht had not restrained him almost by force; when he spent his breath in railing at everything between earth and sky.

"It is the folly of it that maddens me," he cried over and over, "the needless folly! Had I but used my mind to think with, instead of to plan feasts — I am moved to dash my brains out when I remember it!"

"Nay, it is my judgment that was lacking," Morcard said bitterly. "I was an old dog that could not learn a new trick. I should have seen that the old ways no longer avail. The fault was mine." His wrinkled old face was so haggard with self-reproach that the Etheling hastily recanted.

"Now I bethink me, I am wrong, and it is no one's fault. It comes of the curse that lies over the Island. Was there not something rotten in all English palisades, it would never have happened that the pirates got their first foothold. But we have shaken off the spell, and they have not mastered us yet. To-night we will try to get a messenger out to my kinsman in Yorkshire, and another to my father's friend in Essex."

The next day, and for many days thereafter, the Tower windows stared out like expectant eyes. But

no delivering bands ever came over the hills to reward their watching. From the moment that he was swallowed by the outer darkness, the messenger for Yorkshire was as lost to their sight and their knowledge as though he had plunged into the ocean. And a week later, the man who had been sent into Essex crept back with a dejection that foretold his ill success. The ealdorman was taxed, might and main, to protect his own lands. He regretted it, to his innermost vitals, but these were days when each must stand or fall for himself. He could only send his sympathy and the counsel to hold out unflinchingly in the hope that some fortune of war would call the besiegers away.

When he heard that, Father Ingulph forgot his robes to indulge in a curse. "Does he think we have possession of the widow's blessed oil-cruse? If the larder had not been stocked for a week's feasting, we must needs have been starved under ere this. How much longer can we endure, even at one meal a day?" He sighed as he drew his belt in another notch.

When the beginning of the Wine Month came, the bitterest sight that the Tower windows gave out upon was the band of foragers that every morning went forth from the Danish camp-fires. Every noon they returned, amid a taunting racket, with armfuls of ale-skins, back-loads of salted meats, and bags bulging with the bread which they had forced the terrorized farm-women into baking for them. "They have the ingenuity of fiends!" Father Ingulph was wont to groan after each of these spectacles.

At last the time arrived when it looked as though these visions were to be the only glimpses of food vouchsafed to them.

"Bread for one more meal; and the last ale-cask has been broached," the steward answered in a very faint voice when Morcard put the nightly question.

Because it was not possible for the old man's face to record more misery, the light of the guard-room fire over which he crouched showed no change whatever in his expression.

It was the young lord, who sat beside him, that answered. After a pause he said gently, "Go and try to get some sleep. At least you can dream of food."

"I have done no otherwise for a sennight," the man sighed as he hurried away to snatch the tongs from a serf who was spending an unnecessary fagot upon the fire. At any other time he would have shouted at him, but it was little loud talking that was done within the walls these days.

When they were left alone, the old cniht threw himself back upon the bench and covered his face with his mantle. "I have outlived my usefulness," he moaned. "I have lived to bring ruin on the house that has sheltered me. What guilt I lie under!" For a time he lay as stark and rigid under his cloak as though death had already closed about him. The guard-room seemed to become a funeral chamber, with a mass of hovering shadows for a pall. The fire held up funeral tapers of flickering flame, and the whispers of the starv-

ing men who warmed themselves in its heat broke the silence as dismally as the voices of mourners.

But the Lord of Ivarsdale said steadily, "Not so, good friend; and it hurts my pride sorely that you should speak as if I were still of no importance in my father's house. That which I call myself lord of, it behooved me to rule over. If ever I get out of this —" checking himself, he rose to his feet. "The smoke makes my wits heavy. Methinks I will go up into the air a while."

He took a step toward the door, but halted when the red-cloaked page, who had been stretched near him on the bench, started up as though preparing to accompany him.

"Stay where you are, lad. These fasts from sleep will parch your young brains. I go up to the platform because I would rather walk than rest; but do you remain here by the fire and try to catch a drowsiness from its heat."

But the page advanced with the old wilful shake of his curly head. "I also would rather walk, if you please."

As he looked at him, compassion came into the Etheling's face. The hollowness of their sockets made the boy's large eyes look larger, and his fever-flush trebled their brightness. Sebert said, with a poor attempt at a smile, "Little did I think that my hospitality would ever produce such a guest. Poor youngling! You would better have crept out to your countrymen, as I bade you."

Again the dark head shook obstinately. "Rather would I starve with you than feast with them. I go not out till you go."

Something seemed to come into the young man's throat as he was about to speak, for he swallowed hard and was silent. Putting an arm about the slender figure, he drew it to his side; and so they left the room and began to climb the stairs.

As soon as the curtain fell at their heels a stifling mustiness came to their nostrils, and a chill that was like the flat of a knife-blade pressed against their cheeks. They drew breath thankfully when they had come up into the sweet freshness of the night air. Flashing on the weapons of the pacing sentinels, a glory of silver moonlight lay like a visible silence over the parapets. In the darkness below, a sea of forest trees was murmuring and splashing at the passing of a wind. Yet deeper down in the dark glowed the fires of the Danish camp, — red eyes of the dragon that would rise ere long and crush them under his iron claws.

After they had twice made the round without speaking, the page said gravely, "I heard what Brithwald told you about the bread, lord. What will overtake us when that is gone? Shall we charge them, so that we may die fighting?" When the Etheling did not answer immediately, his companion looked up at him with loving reproach. "You forget that you need conceal nothing from me, dear lord. I am not as those clowns below. You have even said that you found pleasure in telling me your mind."

Sebert's hand was lifted from the red cloak to touch the thin cheek caressingly. "I should be extreme ungrateful were I to say less, dear lad. There is a man's courage in your boy's body, and I think a woman could not be more faithful in her love — How! Are you cold that you shiver so? Pull the corner of my cloak about you."

But the page cast it off impatiently. "No, no, it is nothing; no more than that one of those men out there may have walked across the spot that is to be my grave. Sooner would I bite my tongue off than interrupt you. I ask you not to let it hinder your speech."

Again a kind of affectionate pity came into the young noble's face. "Does it mean so much to you to hear that you have been faithful in your service?"

"It means — so much to me!" the boy repeated softly; and if the man's ear had not been far afield, he might have divined the secret of the green tunic only from the tenderness of the low voice. But when his mind came back to his companion again, the lad was looking at him with a little smile touching the curves of his wistful mouth.

"Do you know why this mishap which has occurred to you seems great luck for me? Because otherwise it is not likely that you would have found out how true a friend I could be. If it had happened that I had gone with Rothgar's messenger that night, you would have remembered me only as one who could entertain you when it was your wish to laugh. But now, since it has been allowed me to endure suffering with you

and to share your mind when it was bitterest, you have given me a place in your heart. And to-morrow, when we go forth together, and the Dane slays me with you because it will be open to him then that for your sake I have become unfaithful to him, you will remember our fellowship even to — "

But Sebert's hand silenced the tremulous lips. "No more, youngling! I adjure you by your gentleness," he whispered unsteadily. "You owe me no such love; and it makes my helplessness a thousand-fold more bitter. Say no more, little comrade, if you would not turn my heart into a woman's when it has need to be of flint. Sit you here on the ledge the while that I take one more turn. You will not? Then come with me, and we will make the round together, and apply our wits once more to the riddle. Until swords have put an end to me, I shall not cease to believe that it has an answer."

Below, in the dense blackness of the forest, an occasional owl sounded his echoless cry. From still deeper in the dark, where the Danish camp-fires glowed, a harp-note floated up on the wind with a fragment of wild song. But it was many a long moment before the silence that hovered over the doomed Tower was broken by any sound but the measured tramp of the sentinels.

It was Sebert who brought the dragging pace finally to a halt, throwing himself upon a stone bench to hold his head in his hands. "We cannot drive them off; that needs no further proof. And I do not

see how we can hold out till the time that chance entices them away, when but one meal stands between us and starvation, and already we are as weak as rabbits. Naught can profit us save craft."

The dark head beside him shook hopelessly; but he repeated the verdict with additional emphasis. "I tell you, craft is our only hope; some artfulness that shall undermine their strength even as their tricks crept, snake-like, under our guard." Turning in his seat, he set his face toward the darkness, clutching his head in renewed effort.

No word came from the page, but a strange look was dawning in his upturned face. Whether it was a great terror that had shaken his soul or whether a joy had come to him that raised him to heaven itself, it was impossible to tell, for the signs of both were in his eyes. And when at last he spoke, both thrilled through his voice. "Lord," he said slowly, "I think I see where a trick is possible."

As Sebert turned from the darkness, the boy struggled up and stood before him. "If they could be made to believe a lie about the food? If they could be made to believe that you have enough to continue this for a long time? Their natures are such that already it must have become a hardship for them to remain quiet."

The Etheling's eyes were riveted on the other's lips; his every muscle strained toward him. Under the stimulus the page's words seemed to come a little less uncertainly, a little more quickly.

"I think I could manage it for you, lord. They think me your unwilling captive: you remember what the messenger said about freeing me? If I should go to Rothgar—" his voice broke and his eyes sought his friend's eyes as though they were wine-cups from which he would drink courage—"if I should go to Rothgar, lord, I could declare myself escaped, and he would be likely to believe any story I told him."

Sebert leaped up and caught the lad by the shoulders, then hesitated, weighing it in his mind, half fearing to believe. "But are you sure that your tongue will not trip you? Or your face, poor mouse? What! Can you make them believe in abundance when your cheeks are like bowls for the catching of your tears?"

The boy seemed to gather strength from the caressing hands, as Thor from the touch of his magic belt. He even gave a little breathless laugh of elation. "As to that, I think he is not wise enough to guess the truth. I will tell him that you have thought it revengeful toward him to starve your Danish captive; and because it is in every respect according to what he would do in your place, I think he will have no misgivings."

Pulling the soft curls with a suggestion of his old lightheartedness, the Etheling laughed with him. "You bantling! Who would have dreamed you to that degree artful? Are you certain your craft will bear you out? I would not have you suffer their anger. Are you capable of so much feigning?"

For an instant the boy's eyes were even audacious; and all the hollowness of the cheeks could not hide a flashing dimple. "Oh, my dear lord, I am capable of so much more feigning than you guess!" he answered daringly.

"Nay, have I not been wont to call you elf?" Sebert returned. Then his voice deepened with feeling. "By the soul of my father, Fridtjof, if you bring me out of this snare, me and mine, I declare with truth that there will be no recompense you can ask at my hands which I shall not be glad to grant—" He paused in the wonder of seeing the sparkle in the blue eyes flee away like a flitting light.

The page turned from him almost with a sob. "Pray you, promise me nothing!" he said hastily. "If ever I see you again, and you have more to give me than pity— Nay, I shall lose my courage if I think of that part. Get me out quickly while the heart is firm within me. And give me a draught from your cup to warm my blood."

"Certainly it would be best for you to come to them while they are in such a state of feasting that their good-humor is keenest and their wits dullest," Sebert assented.

He spoke but with the matter-of-factness of a soldier reconnoitring a position, but on the girl in the page's dress the words fell like blows. Then it was that she realized for the first time how ill a crumb can satisfy the hunger which asks for a loaf; that she knew that her body was not the only part of her which

was starving. Somewhere on that dark stairway she lost the boyishness out of her nature forever. The thin cheeks were white under their tan when they came again into the light of the guard-room fire; and the blue eyes had in them a woman's reproach.

"It would show no more than friendship if you said that you were sorry to have me go," she told him with quivering lips. "Are you so eager in getting me off that you cannot say you will miss me?"

But the young lord only laughed good-humoredly as he poured the wine. "What a child you are! Do you not know those things without my telling you? And as for missing you, I am not likely to have time. The first chance you get, you will slip back to me — if you do not, I will come after you and flog you into the bargain; be there no forgetting!"

She could not laugh as she would once have done; instead she choked in the cup and pushed it from her. A passionate yearning came over her for one such word, one such look, as he would give the dream-lady when she should come. With her secret on her lips, she lifted her eyes to his.

A little amused but more pitying, and withal very, very kind, his glance met hers; and her courage forsook her. Suppose the word she was about to speak should not make his face friendlier? Suppose his surprise should be succeeded by haughtiness, or, worse than all, by a touch of that gay scorn? Even at the memory of it she shrank. Better a crumb than no

bread at all. Turning away, she followed him in silence down the dark passage.

When the moment of parting arrived, and Sebert's hand lay on the last bolt, that mood was so strong upon her that it seemed to her as though she were passing out of life into death. Clinging to his cloak, with her face buried in its folds, she wet it with far bitterer tears than any she had shed over her murdered kinsmen.

"I wish I had not thought of it! I wish I had not told you!" she sobbed into the soft muffling. "Only to be near you I thought heaven; and now the Fates have cheated me even out of that."

The Etheling put his hand under the bent head to raise it that he might hear what the lips were saying, and she covered his palm with kisses. Then slipping away, like the elf he had called her, she glided through the narrow space of the half-open door and was gone, sobbing, out into the night.

CHAPTER XV

HOW FRIDTJOF CHEATED THE JOTUN

Such is the love of women,
Who falsehood meditate,
As if one drove not rough-shod
On slippery ice
A spirited two-year-old
And unbroken horse.

HÁVAMÁL.

"I TRUST my sword; I trust my steed;
But most I trust myself at need,'"

the fair-haired scald sang exultingly to the Danishmen sprawled around the camp-fire. It was to no graceful love-song that his harp lent its swelling chords, but to a stern chant of mighty deeds, whose ringing notes sped through the forest like the bearers of war-arrows, knocking at the door of each sleeping echo until it awoke and carried on the summons.

Echoes awoke as well in the breasts of those who listened. When the minstrel laid aside his harp for his cup, Snorri Scar-Cheek brought his fist down in a

mighty blow upon the earth. "To hear such words and know one's self doomed to wallow in mast!"

A dozen shaggy heads wagged surly acquiescence. But from the figure outstretched upon the splendid bearskin a harsh voice sounded. "Now I see that because you lie in mast you have a swine's wit," it said. "Do you want the thrall to stand forth and prove for the hundredth time that their bins must needs be as empty as your head?"

Venturing no more than a growl, the man dropped his chin back upon his fists. But Brown-Cloak, the English serf, found somewhere the notion that here was an opportunity to rehearse once more the service which was his sole claim upon his new masters' indulgence, and he got on his legs accordingly.

"I can say soothly that you will not have to bear it much longer, Lord Dale," he reassured. "My own eyes saw that—" He ended in a howl as a half-gnawed sheep-bone from the warrior's hand struck him with a force that knocked him sprawling among the ashes.

"Do not trouble yourself to answer until you are questioned," the Scar-Cheek recommended briefly. And a round of laughter followed the poor scapegoat as he picked himself up, groaning, and crept away into the shadow. In the restlessness of their inactivity, and this swift breaking into passages of growling and tooth-play whenever, in their narrow confines, they chanced to jostle each other, they were like nothing so much as a pack of caged wolves.

Into the den, a few minutes later, the daughter of Frode came on her difficult mission. Her face was so ghastly that the man who first caught sight of it did not recognize her, and snatched up his weapon as against an enemy.

It was the Scar-Cheek who offered the first welcome in a jovial shout. "The hawk escaped from the cage! Well done, champion! Did you batter a way out with your mighty fists? Did you get fretful and slay the Englishman? Leave off your bashfulness and tell us your deeds of valor!" A score of hands were stretched forth to draw the boy into the circle; a score of horns were held out for his refreshment.

To all of them Randalin yielded silently, — silently accepting the cup which was nearest, in order to gain time by sipping its contents. She realized that only a manner of perfect unconcern could carry her through, yet she felt herself shaking with excitement.

Rothgar sat up on the great skin with a gesture of some cordiality. "Hail to you, Fridtjof Frodesson!" he said. "Your escape is a thing that gladdens me. I did not like the thought of starving you, and I hope your father will overlook the unfriendliness of it."

The Scar-Cheek, who had been scanning her critically where she stood before them, drinking, gave a pitying grunt. "By the crooked horn, boy, you must have had naught but ill luck since the time of Scoerstan! No more meat is on you than a raven could eat; and the night I was in the Englishman's hall, you had

the appearance of having been under a lash. Your guardian spirit must have gone astray."

Though she managed to keep her eyes upon her cup, Randalin could not hinder a wave of burning color from over-running her face. Seeing it, Rothgar held up his handless left arm for silence.

"You act in a mannerless way, Snorri Gudbrandsson, when you remind a high-spirited youth that he has been disgraced in his mind. Yet do not let that prevent your joy, my Bold One. To make up for the injury I have been to you, I will give you a revenge on the Englishman that shall wipe out everything you have endured from him. If it is possible for me to take him alive and bind him, your own hand shall be the one to strike Sebert Oswaldsson his death-blow."

The girl's nervousness betrayed her into a burst of hysterical laughter, but her wits were quick enough to turn it to good account. She said with Fridtjof's own petulance, "Your boon is like the one Canute has in store for me. I am likely to wait so long for both that I shall have no teeth left to chew them with. I like it much better to take your kindness in the shape of food, if that is a loaf yonder."

The abruptness with which silence fell over the group was startling. Snorri bent forward and plucked her sternly back as she made a move toward the bread. A dozen voices questioned her.

"What do you mean by that?" . . . "Why will it take long?" . . . "Are they not short in food?"

Knowing that she could not achieve unconcern, she kept to her petulance, jerking her cloak away from the hand that detained it. "Should I be apt to blame him for starving me if he did it because no better cheer was to be had? Nor do I think you have proved much more liberal. Let me by to the bread."

Instead, the ring narrowed around her; and the chief himself put peremptory questions in his heavy voice. "Has he food? What do you mean? Clear your wits and answer distinctly. Can you not understand that we think this food-question of great importance? The thrall told us they are wont to keep their provisions in the house we burned. Did he lie?"

"I do not know whether he lied or not," Randalin answered slowly; "but it seems to me great foolishness that you did not take the time into consideration. At the end of the harvest, any English house would be fitted out for weeks of feasting. You came the night the larder was fullest; and they have only spent one meal a day since."

Rothgar got upon his feet and towered over her, his Jotun-frame appearing to swell with irritation. "Do you not know how provoking your words are, that you are so glib of tongue?" he thundered. "Tell shortly what you think of their case; can they last one day more?"

The black head nodded emphatically.

"Can they last two days?"

Another nod.

"A week?"

Fridtjof the Bold took refuge in sullenness. "They can last two weeks as easily as one. How much longer are you going to keep me from food?"

She was free after that to do anything she liked, for their excitement was so great that they forgot her existence. Those whose fluency was not hampered by their feelings, relieved their minds by cursing. Those whose anger could be vented only in action, made after the blundering serf. And the few who were boldest turned and bearded the son of Lodbrok himself.

"How much longer must we endure this?" . . . "Think of the game we are missing!" . . . "There is little need to remind me. My naked fists could batter the stones from their places—" . . . "In a week more, it is possible that England may be won!" . . . "What do you care for their wretched land, chief?" . . . "Chief, how much longer must we lie here?"

When that question was finally out, every man heaved a sigh of relief, straightening in his place like a dog that is pricking his ears, and there was a pause.

A fell look came into the Jotun's face as he gazed back at them; and for a time it seemed that he would either answer with his fist or not at all. But at length he began to speak in a voice as keen and hard as his sword.

"You know my temper, and that I must have my will. Always I have thought it shame that my kinsman's odal should lie in English hands, and now I have made up my mind to put an end to it. You know that I am in no way greedy for property. When I obtain

the victory, you shall have every acre and every stick on it to burn or plunder or keep, as best pleases you. But I do not want to reproach myself longer with my neglect; and whether it take two weeks or whether it take twenty — " He interrupted himself to bend forward, shading his eyes with his hands. "If I am not much mistaken," he said in quite another voice, "yonder is Brass Borgar at last! Yonder, near those oak-trees."

In an instant they had all turned to scan the moonlit open. And now that they were silent, the thud of hoofs became distinct. Shouting their welcome, some hurried to heap fresh fuel on the fire, and some ran after more ale-skins; while others rushed forward to meet the messenger and run beside his horse, riddling him with questions.

Folding his arms, the chief awaited him in grim silence. If glances could have burned, he would have writhed under the look that a pair of iris-blue eyes was dealing him over a bread crust. But it may be that his skin was particularly thick, for he betrayed no uneasiness whatever.

When the man finally stood before him, Rothgar said sternly, "It is time you were here! Ten days have gone over your head since I sent you out. You must do one of two things, — either tell great tidings or submit to sharp words."

The Brass One laughed as he saluted. "I should have been liable to sharp steel had I come sooner, chief. Would you have taken it well if I had left without knowing how it went with the battle?"

"Battle!" three-score mouths cried as with one voice. "Who were victorious?"

The man laughed again. "Should I come to you with a noisy voice and my chin held high, if other than one thing had happened? Honor to the Thunderer, the Raven possessed the field!"

Such a clamor arose as though the wolf-pack had tasted blood. Three times, through the trumpet of his hands, Rothgar bawled a command for silence. "One horn you may have, then all this must be told before you eat," he gave orders. And he strode restlessly to and fro until the time came when the horn stood on end above the man's mouth and then was lowered reluctantly.

Drawing his hand across his lips, the Brass One cleared his throat. "At your pleasure, chief. Is it to your mind to begin with the battle? Or do you rather wish to hear of my journey thence? I admit that that part is somewhat likely to stick in my teeth and in your ears. From Otford to Shepey was little better than a retreat, and if —"

"The battle! the battle!" a chorus of voices cried, and the chief confirmed the choice.

"The battle, by all means! The other will do for lesser dishes when the first edge is off our appetite. Where was it? And how long since? Yet, before any of these, how goes it with my royal foster-brother? And how do his traitors carry sail, Odin's curse upon them! Speak! How fares he?"

"On the top of the wave, my chief, — though it is my belief that he has your mind toward Edric Jarl, for

all that Thorkel is ever on hand to urge the value of his craft. And certainly it was exceedingly useful to them at Assington—"

"Assington!" . . . "In Essex?" the chorus broke in upon him. "It happened as Grimalf said—" . . . "—the horse with the bloody saddle which he found over the hill—" . . . "Do you know for certain if Edric—" . . . "Why will you interrupt him?" . . . "Yes, end this talk!" . . . "Go on, go on!"

"I also say go on, in the Troll's name!" the Jotun roared. "Go on and tell us what Edric the Gainer did which they else could not have done."

"I said not that he did what they could not, chief. He did what they would not, as the thrall who pulls off our boots muddies his hands that we may keep ours clean. And a strange wonder is the way in which the English king trusts him even after this treason has been committed! The Gainer fled, with all his men, at the moment when most King Edmund depended upon his support; and in this way left for Danish feet a hewn path where a forest of battle-trees had stood."

Rothgar took no part in the stream of questions and comments that again drowned the voice of the messenger, until suddenly he launched an oath that out-thundered them all: "May Thor feel otherwise than I do, for I vow that were I in his place, I would raise Danish warriors in wool-chests! Is that the valor of the descendants of Odin, that they go not into battle until a foul-hearted traitor has swept the way clean of danger? Is the heart of the King become wax

within him? Or is it that cold-blooded fox at his side that is draining the manhood out of him? I would give much if I had been there!" Casting himself down upon the bearskin, he lay there breathing hard and tearing the fur out in great handfuls.

Brass Borgar spoke with the utmost deprecation: "I say nothing against your feelings, chief; and there are not a few who think as you do; yet I ask you to remember one thing. I ask you to remember that no Dane has ever held back in battle because he had the Traitor's help. Canute uses him to strengthen his back; never to shield his face. The Islanders' own mouths have admitted that the odds are against ten Englishmen if they face one Dane. I think it is because he is out of patience with the war that the King makes of the Gainer a time-saver. It has been told me that he fights not for love of it, nor yet for glory, but because he covets the land of —"

Like the bellow of an angry bull, Rothgar's voice broke through his. "Land! Quickly will I proclaim my opinion of any man who sets his heart on that! He who forgets glory in his eagerness for property, deserves the curse of Thor!"

"Prepare yourself, then, for a thunderbolt, Rothgar Lodbroksson," a clear voice spoke up suddenly.

None but had forgotten the red-cloaked figure munching its bread in the shadow behind them. One and all started in surprise. And the chief turned over his shoulder a face that was livid with anger. "You —you dare!" he roared.

But Randalin's heart was too full of bitterness to leave any room for fear. At the moment, it seemed to her that it did not matter what happened. She stood before the Jotun as straight and unbending as a spear-shaft, and her eyes were reflections of his own. Her wonder was great when slowly, even while his eyes blazed, Rothgar's mouth began to twitch at the corners. All at once he rolled over on his back with a shout of laughter.

"By Ragnar, there will not be many jests to equal this!" he gasped. "That a titmouse should ruffle its feathers and upbraid me! Here is merriment!" He lay there laughing after the others had joined in with him; and his face was not entirely sober the next time he turned it toward her. "Good Berserker, give me leave to live some while longer in order that I may explain my intentions."

Yet when he had risen, a change came into his voice that brought every man to his feet. "We will make ready to go at cockcrow," he said abruptly. "If it were only a matter of a couple of days, I would wait; but since it will be at least a week before we can expect them to give in, I think it unadvisable to waste more time. Since the King is in this temper, the next battle may well be the last; and much shame would come of it if we did not have our share. We will start when the cock crows. As soon as Canute gets the kingship over the English realm, Ivarsdale will fall to me anyway. Let the Angle enjoy himself until then."

CHAPTER XVI

THE SWORD OF SPEECH

Speech-runes thou must know
If thou wilt that no one
For injury with hate requite thee.

SIGDRÍFUMÁL.

NO holiday finery tricked out the Danish host where it squatted along the Severn Valley that dreary October day; neither festal tables nor dimpling women nor even the gay striped tents. Of all the multitude of flags but one banner pricked the murky air, — the Raven standard that marked the headquarters of the King; and its sodden folds distinguished nothing more regal than a shepherd's wattled cote. Scattered clumps of trees offered the weary men their only protection against the drizzling rain; and the sole suggestions of comfort were the sickly fires that patient endeavor had managed to coax into life in these retreats. Some, whom exhaustion had robbed even of a fire-tender's ambition, had dropped down on the very

spot where they had slipped from their saddles, and slept, cloak-wrapped, in the wet. And the circles about the fires were not much noisier.

Rothgar's face gathered gravity as he gained the crest of the last hill that lay between him and the straggling encampment.

"The rain appears to fall as coldly on their cheer as on their fires," he commented. "They hug the earth like the ducks on Videy Island."

"And look about as much like warriors who have got a victory," the child of Frode added wonderingly.

The Jotun threw her a glance, where she rode at his side. "Hear words of fate! I think that is the first time you have spoken in three days."

"You would think that great luck if you knew the kind of thoughts that have been in my mind," she muttered. But the son of Lodbrok was already leading his men down the hillside toward the point where the silken banner mocked at the wattled walls.

Under the thatched roof of the hut, a still more striking contrast awaited the eyes of those who entered. With a milking-stool for his table and the shepherd's rude bunk for a throne, the young King of the Danes was bending in scowling meditation over an open scroll. Against the mud-plastered walls, the crimson splendor of his cloak and the glitter of his gold embroideries gave him the look of a tropical bird in an osier cage; while the fiery beauty of his face shone like a star in the dusk of the windowless cell. Days in the saddle and nights in the council had pared

away every superfluous curve from cheek and chin, until there was not one line left that did not tell of impatient energy; and every spark of his burning soul seemed centred in his brilliant eyes. At the sight of him, the girl's heart started and shook like a harp-string under the touch of the master; and Rothgar, the stolid, the stern, who had come to upbraid, bowed reverently as he grasped the hand his leader stretched out.

"King, I would not have kept away had I guessed that my sword would be useful to you. It was my belief that you were entertaining yourself with getting property in Mercia, else would I have left all to come to you."

Canute half pressed the huge paw and then half spurned it. "It was in my mind to give you a great scolding when I got you again. I thought you had drunk sea-water and blood out of a magic horn and forgotten me utterly. You must have gotten yourself fitted out for the rest of your life since at last you were willing to leave."

"Lord," Rothgar began, "I have come back to you as poor as I went—"

But the King interrupted him, as at that moment, in the figure hesitating at the door, he recognized his missing ward. "Say not so, when you have brought back the bright blade we mourned as lost!" He put out his other hand with a gleam of pleasure in his changeful eyes. "Welcome to you, Fridtjof the Bold! I should like to believe that you are as glad to return to me as I am glad to receive you."

As she stood there watching him, Randalin had been undergoing a strange transformation. For four months she had almost forgotten his existence, he had been little more than an empty name, while she gave every energy of mind and heart to the things about her. But now, behold! One sight of his life-full face, one moment in his dominating presence, and those months were swept into the land of dreams. His deeds alone appeared vital; he alone seemed real. She, the Etheling himself, were but as shadows depending upon his sun-like career. If he should choose to shine upon them, what dark evil could come nigh? It was in all sincerity that she bent her knee as she took his hand. "Lord," she cried impulsively, "I have brought you back a loyal heart! I have been very close to the English King, and he is unworthy to hold your sword."

Canute gave a sudden laugh; but it was a short one, and he turned away abruptly to begin a restless pacing to and fro. "You choose your words in a thoughtful way," he said. "It is seen that you do not say how it would be if he were to hold his sword against mine." Pausing before Rothgar, he jerked his head toward the scroll. "Do you know what that is? That is a challenge from the Ironside."

"A challenge?" his listeners cried in chorus.

He seemed to take petulant offence at their surprise. "A challenge. Did you never hear the word before, that you stare like oxen? He invites me to settle this affair by single combat on the island, yonder; and there is the greatest sense in what he says.

Every one who has a man's wit is tired of the strife; and if we continue at it, there will not be much to win besides ashes and bones."

Rothgar sat gazing at the wooden door as though he could see through it the huddled groups outside. "Now by no means do I think it strange that your host is not in high spirits," he said.

With an impatient shrug the King moved on again. "It has happened, then, that the news has spread? I wonder whether they are troubling themselves most for fear that I shall undertake this fight and get killed, or for fear that I shall turn back from it and the war will be obliged to go on. And I should be glad if I knew what expectation was uppermost in the Gainer's mind when he made the plan. For certainly one sees his claw behind the pen."

"May wolves tear him!" Rothgar burst out. "Two kings he has used as oaten pipes, but never did I think that you would make the third."

Canute's foot jarred upon the earth; his face was suddenly aflame. "And never will I, while my head remains above ground! Now are you even more rash than you are wont! It is I who play on him, not he on me. Through him, as through a pipe, I have tempted Edmund on; and through him, as through a pipe, I have called Edmund off; and as with a broken pipe I shall part with him when I am done,—and think it no falseness either, since I know for certain that it is the fate he has in store for me, as soon as I cease to be gainful for him." The worst of the young chief's

nature showed for an instant in the smile that widened his nostrils. Then it gave way to another flash of temper. "Nor am I a pipe for your plaything, either. What! Am I to be as a child between you and Thorkel, that each time I follow the advice of one of you, I am to get a tongue-lashing from the other? Have you not got it into your head that I am your King?"

Rothgar gave a short laugh. "I do not know if I have got it into my head or not," he said; "but I am certain that my body is aware of your kingship." He did not even move his eyes toward the stump of his wrist, but Canute turned from him suddenly, his lip caught in his teeth, and once more strode up and down the narrow space.

After the fourth round, he stopped and laid his hands affectionately upon his foster-brother's shoulders. "Too long have we endured each other's roughness, comrade, for you to think that unfriendliness is in my mind because I foam over in this way. I tell you, you would not wonder at it if you knew the state of my feelings. And I will not conceal it that I am glad you have come to share them — though I have not the intention to heed a word of your advice," he added, half laughing, half threatening. Pushing the other down upon the rough bunk, he seated himself beside him, his elbows on his knees, his chin cupped in his palms.

"The host is full of impatience; and I am weary unto madness. Never do we come to any end, nor

ever shall until that time when the wolf shall catch the sun! I have nowhere heard of a more foolish war than this. It was in my mind, as you came in, that I would send a favorable answer to the Englishman and get the matter decided, one way or another."

Even Randalin uttered a cry; and Rothgar caught his King by the arm as though to snatch him out of bodily peril.

"Only one way would be possible, Canute! Your waist is not so big as one of his arms. His sword would cleave you as if it cut water."

Half laughing, but more resentful, the King freed himself. "Now do you hold my power so lightly? More than once have I gotten under your guard. If skill could accomplish anything, you would not have to wait long for what I should fix upon." He broke off with a shrug and flung himself back upon the straw of the bunk. "Let us speak of something else," he said. "What did the boy say about having seen Edmund?"

Somewhat ramblingly, as uncertain of his interest, Randalin told him of her glimpse of the Ironside; and he listened lying back on the straw, his eyes fixed on the ceiling. She had begun to think he had forgotten her, when all at once he shot out a swift question: "Did you never find out what the wool was that Edric Jarl pulled over his eyes?"

"Not unless one could guess it from what King Edmund said, lord, — that the Jarl had found them so much cleverer than he expected that his victory was

without relish to him, and he was desirous to regain their friendship."

A distinct chuckle came from Canute, and some murmur about the Ironside's chin. Then he said, "Go on, and tell me everything you can remember"; and once more lay staring at the ceiling in silence.

He did not appear to notice it when she stopped; the pause lasted so long that Rothgar concluded that sleep had overtaken their host and rose softly to betake himself to such cheer as the fires offered. As he made the first step, however, Canute sat up suddenly, striking his fist upon the bunk.

"I will do it!" he said. While they stared, he rose and recommenced his hurried pacing, his eyes keen and far away, his mouth set in grim resolve.

"Do what, King?" the son of Lodbrok ventured at last.

Canute's eyes appeared to rest upon the pair without seeing them. "Accept the challenge," he answered absently. Then the utter horror in both faces brought him momentarily back. "You need not look like that. I would not do it if I did not see a good chance to win. There are other weapons than those which dwell in sheaths."

"But if you lose?" Rothgar's harsh voice was discordant with emotion. "If you lose?"

The King silenced him impatiently. "I do not think I shall lose; but if it be otherwise, then Fate will rule it. I prefer to risk everything rather than to experience more delay." Catching the bewildered page

by the collar, he pushed him toward the door. "Run, boy, with all the speed of your legs, and find Ingimund the Swimmer and fetch him here. And you, foster-brother, if my fame is important to you, do you betake yourself to those dumpish oafs around the fires and try, by any means whatever, to remedy their faint-heartedness. Ask them if they want the host across the river to think them turned into a herd of weeping bondwomen. Ask them if they think thus to show honor to their King. Tell them that I take it as no proof of their love; that I will have none of that halting faith which limps up with a great cry after the show is over. Tell them — Oh, tell them anything you think worth while — only that you get some noise out of them! Evil will come of it if the Englishman is allowed to believe that he has beaten us before ever he has struck a blow."

Rothgar sighed as he moved forward. "I am very unfit to speak words of cheerfulness to anybody; but this shall, like other things, be as you wish."

CHAPTER XVII

THE JUDGMENT OF THE IRON VOICE

His power should
Every sagacious man
Use with discretion,
For he will find,
When among the bold he comes,
That no one alone is doughtiest.

HÁVAMÁL.

FOLD by fold, the sun's golden fingers drew apart the mists that hid the valley. One by one, the red Severn cliffs were uncovered, and the wooded steeps on which the rival hosts were encamped. Brighter and brighter the river's silver gleamed through its veilings. Finally the moment came when the last mist-wreath floated up like a curtain, and there lay open the shining water, and the rocky islet it seethed about, and the vision of two boats setting forth from the two shores amid the noise of shouting thousands. It was the hour of the royal duel, when the fate-thread of a nation, beaded with human destinies, lay between

the fingers of two men. What a scattering of the beads if the cord should be cut!

Under the elms of the east bank, the daughter of Frode stood and watched the boats set out; and the hands that hung at her side opened and shut as though they were gasping for breath. For a moment she tortured herself with the thought that she knew not which side to pray for, since the victory of either would mean her beloved's undoing; then she forgot Sebert's future in her own present. Turning, she found herself facing a wall of stalwart bodies, a sea of coarse faces, and discovered, with a sudden tightening of her muscles, that all the eyes which were not following the boat were centred curiously upon herself.

Before she could take a step, the nearest warrior thrust out a hand and caught her by her black locks. "Stop a little, my Bold One," he said gruffly. "Now that you have a moment to spare from the high-born folk, it is the wish of us churls to hear some of your news."

A score of heavy voices seconded the demand, and the wall gradually curved into a circle around her. They were good-natured enough, — even the grasp on her hair was roughly playful, — but her heart seemed to stop in her as a swimmer's might the first instant he lost sight of land and beheld only towering billows looming around him. She darted one swift glance at her knife, and another at an old willow-tree that overhung the bank, some thirty yards away. But even as she thought it, the hand left her hair and closed about her wrist.

"No cause for knife-play or leg-play either, my hawk," the gruff voice rebuked her. "To no one are we more anxious to show friendship than to Canute's ward; and you act like no true man if you cannot, when occasion requires, leave off your high-born ways and be a plain comrade among plain men."

Again a murmur approved his words: "That is well spoken. Frode of Avalcomb would be the first to thank us for teaching it to you." . . . "He carried no such haughty head, young boy. I fought more than one battle at his heels." . . . "Come on, now!" . . . "Make haste! We want to get into place before they come to land."

This time it was not a shadow but a sparkle of sunshine that mocked in Randalin's ear: "You have not dared to be a woman, so you must dare to be a man." She acknowledged the pitiless truth with a sigh of submission.

"Take your hands off me, and it shall be as you wish."

The big Swede released her wrist to catch her around the waist and toss her like a bone upon the platter of his shield, which four of them promptly raised between them and bore along, laughing uproariously at her sprawling efforts for dignity. When they came to a spot along the bank which was open enough to give them an unobstructed view of the island, they permitted her to scramble down and seat herself upon the grass, where they ringed themselves around her, twenty deep.

"Now for it! While they are waiting for Edmund to land; before there is anything to watch," the Scar-Cheek commanded. "Tell what you told Canute with regard to the English King which made him so reckless as to agree to this bargain."

There was nothing for it but obedience. A flower in a thicket of thistles, a lamb in the midst of wolves, she sat and watched the tipping of the scales that had her fortune among their weights.

A shout from the surging mass of English opposite told when the Ironside had landed; and as soon as it was seen whom he had chosen to accompany him as his witness, a buzz of excitement passed along the Danish line.

"Edric! by all the gods, Edric Jarl!"

"Now, for the first time, I believe that victory will follow Canute's sword!" Brass Borgar ejaculated. "Since nothing less than the madness betokening death could cause Edmund to continue his trust in the Gainer, it is seen from this that he is a death-fated man."

From the others there came a volley of epithets, so foul a flight that the girl's knuckles whitened in her struggles to keep her hands down from her ears. A picture rose in her mind of Sebert's dream-lady, passing her waiting-time among soft-voiced maids, and her heart turned sick within her.

It was little time that the pack gave her for revery, however; now it was Edric Jarl of whom they wanted to hear.

"While they are talking about the terms, there is nothing to look at; tell us how the Gainer pulled the net around King Edmund," the rough voices demanded. And again she was obliged to bend her wits to their task.

But it came at last, the end that was the beginning. Suddenly a hand reached around her neck and shut over her mouth. "Stop! They are taking their places. Look!"

He need not have added that last word; from that moment for many thousands of eyes there was but one object in the world, — the strip of rock-ribbed earth and the two figures that faced each other upon it.

As they fixed their gaze on their champion, the English yelled exultantly, and the Danes bravely rivalled them in noise; but it was more a cry of rage and grief than a cheer. Now that the royal duellists stood forth together, stripped of cloak and steel shirt, and wearing no other helm than the golden circlet of their rank, their inequality was even more glaring than alarmed fancy had painted it. The crown of Canute's shining locks reached only to the chin of the mighty Ironside; and the width of nearly two palms was needed on his shoulders.

Borgar turned, with tears in his bleared eyes, and threw himself face-downward on the earth; and the fellow next to him, with the mien of a madman, thrust his mantle between his teeth and bit and tore at it like a dog. "It is murder," he snarled, "murder."

Of all the Northmen, the young King alone appeared serenely undisturbed. When he had saluted the Ironside with royal courtesy, he met his sword as though he were beginning a practising bout with his foster-brother. Smoothly, evenly, without haste or fury, the blades began to sing their wordless song to the listening banks.

After a time Borgar dared to raise his face from the grass. "Is he yet alive?" he whispered.

The men did not seem to hear him. Humped over the earth, with starting eyes and necks stretched to their uttermost, they were like so many boulders. Nor did Frode's daughter seem to feel that the hand the Brass One had raised himself upon was crushing her foot; she did not even glance toward him as she answered: "Simpleton! Do you think the King does not know how to handle his weapon? If only his strength —"

Her sentence was not finished, and the man next to her drew in his breath with a great whistling rush. Canute's weapon, playing with the lightness of a sunbeam, had evaded a stroke of the great flail and touched for an instant the shoulder of its wielder. Had he put a pound more force into the thrust — A groan crept down the Danish line when the bright blade rose, as lightly as it had fallen, and continued its butterfly dance. It consoled them a little, however, that no cheer went up from the English, — only a low buzz that was half of anger, half of astonishment.

Farther along the eastern bank, where Thorkel the Tall stood beside Ulf Jarl and Eric of Norway,

there was not even a groan. The first rift came in the puzzled clouds of Eric's face. "Here is the first happening that makes me hope!" he said. "If he has something more than his fencing accomplishment to support him, it may be that an unfavorable outcome need not be expected."

The Tall One's brows relaxed ever so little from their snarl of worry. "The boy has experienced good training, for all that he has at present the appearance of a great fool. If Rothgar's warrior skill is in his arm, yet my caution should be in his head."

Certainly there was no Berserk madness about the young Danishman; there was hardly even seriousness. Now his blade was a fleeing will-o'-the-wisp, keeping just out of reach of Edmund's brand with apparently no thought but of flight. Now, when the Ironside's increasing vehemence betrayed him into an instant's rashness, it was a humming-bird darting into a flower-cup. But it always rose again as daintily as it had alighted.

The Danish bank was frantic with excitement. "It is the dance of the Northern Lights!" they cried. "Thor has sent him his own sword!"

The lines of English were wild with anger. "Crush him, the hornet, the wasp! Crush him, Edmund!" they roared.

In his exultation, the Scar-Cheek rolled himself over and over on the grass, and wound up by thrusting his shaggy head into the lap of the red-cloaked page. "I must do something for joy," he panted;

"and — except for your hair — you look near enough like a handsome woman. Do you bend down and kiss me every time Canute pricks him."

His head fell to the ground with a thump as the child of Frode leaped to her feet.

"If you lay finger on me again," she whispered, "I will caress you with this!" and for an instant a knife-blade glittered before the bulging eyes. Snorri rolled back with alacrity and an oath; and after a moment Frode's daughter dropped down again and hid her face in her hands. If the King should be slain and she be left adrift in this foul sea! She might as well have screamed as moaned, for all that they would have noticed.

About this time Canute's blade appeared to have become in earnest. Ceasing its airy defence, it took on the aggressive. Instead of a flitting sunbeam, it became a shaft from a burning glass; instead of one merry humming-bird, it became a whole swarm of skimming, swooping, darting swallows, waging war on a bewildered owl. Before the sudden fury of the onslaught, Edmund gave back a pace. And either because his anger made him reckless or his great bulk was against him, he presently was forced to draw back another step. Wildest cheers went up from the Northmen. It seemed as though they would wade in a body across the river.

Only Eric of Norway stamped with uneasiness; and the overhanging brows of Thorkel the Tall were as lowering hoods above his eyes. "Well has he

hoarded his strength," he muttered. "Well has he saved it, yet — yet — "

At that moment such a roar went up from Northern throats as might well have startled the wolf's shadow off the face of the sun; for Edmund Ironside had retreated a third step, and the Dane's point appeared to lie at the Englishman's heart. Then the uproar died somewhere in mid-air, for in what seemed the very act of thrusting, Canute had leaped backward and lowered his blade. So deep was the hush on either side the river that the whir of a bird's wing sounded as loud as a flight of arrows. Bending forward, with strained ears and starting eyes, the spectators saw that the Northern King was speaking, eagerly, with now and then an impulsive gesture, while the English King listened motionless.

"Has he got out of his wits?" the Scar-Cheek roared, fairly dancing with impatience.

In Randalin's face a flash of memory was struggling with bewilderment. "Other weapons than those which dwell in sheaths." Had he meant "the sword of speech," his tongue?

With the deliberate grace which characterized his every motion, the Ironside slid his sword back to its case, and they saw him take a slow step forward and slowly extend his hand. Then they saw Canute spring to meet him, and their palms touch in a long grasp.

From the English shore there went up a joyful shout of "Peace!" And a deafening clamor rose in answer from the Danish bank. But what sentiment

predominated in that, it would be difficult to say. Blended with rejoicing over their King's safety, were cries of bitter disappointment, the cries of thirsty men who have seen wine dashed from their lips.

In their retreat, the two Northern jarls and the young monarch's foster-father faced each other uncertainly. "Here is mystery!" Eric of Norway said at last. "I should be thankful if you would tell me whether he thought it unwise to kill the Englishman before the face of his army; or whether he is in truth struck with love toward him, as the fools seem to believe?"

"Or whether he had reached the exact limit of his strength so that he was obliged to save himself by some trick of words?" Ulf Jarl suggested.

The Tall One shook his head slowly. "Now, as always, it is he alone who can altogether explain his actions. It might easily be that in his mad impatience he overvalued his strength, so that he was obliged to stop short to keep within bounds. But I think you will find that there is still some trick which is not open to our sight. His man-wit is deepening very fast; I will not be so bold as to say that I can always fathom it."

"Perhaps he thinks a short peace would be useful to the host," the Norwegian said, and laughed. "Such a truce is as comfortable as a cloak when the weather is stark, and as easy to get rid of when the sun comes out."

By their faces, the others appeared to agree with him; but before they could express themselves, a

swimmer rose like a dripping seal out of the water at their feet.

"Peace and division again!" he cried breathlessly. "And it is the King's will that you get into a boat and come to him at once."

The rush of the crowd to the water-side to question the messenger gave Randalin her chance for freedom; and she was not slow in taking it. A moment mo and she was in the very top of the willow-tree, clasping her hands and wringing them in alternate thanksgiving and terror.

"Whatever it bring upon me, I will get back to my woman's clothes," she vowed to herself over and over. "Though it become a hindrance to me, though it be the cause of my death, I will be a woman always. Odin forgive me that I thought I had courage enough to be a man!"

CHAPTER XVIII

WHAT THE RED CLOAK HID

At eve, the day is to be praised;
A woman, after she is dead.

HÁVAMÁL.

IN the vault overhead blue had deepened into purple, and all the silver star-lamps had been hung out, their flames trembling unceasingly in the playing winds. By the soft light, the Jotun, who was striding across the Danish camp, saw a graceful boyish form leave the circle around the King's fire and join a group of mounted men waiting on the river bank, some fifty yards away.

"Ho there, Fridtjof!" he roared wrathfully.

The figure turned, and he had a fleeting glimpse of a hand waved in mocking farewell. Then the boy sprang into the saddle of a horse that one of the warriors was holding, and the whole band moved forward at a swinging pace.

"If you had waited a little, you would be less light on your feet," the Jotun growled as he strode on, striking his heels savagely upon the frosty ground.

"Where is the King?" he demanded, as soon as he had reached the ring of nobles sipping mead around the royal fire. Between swallows, they were carrying on a heated discussion of the day's events; but Eric of Norway stopped long enough to nod toward the wattled hut beneath the silken banner.

"In there; and I will give you this chain off my neck if you can guess what he is doing."

"It is likely that he is busy with messengers," Rothgar said with an accent of vexation. "I had hoped to reach him before he finished drinking, but there was a brawl among my men which —"

"He is playing chess," Eric said dryly.

"Chess!"

The Norwegian nodded as he swallowed. "Heard you ever anything to equal that? He has the appearance of a boy who has been released from a lesson. I wish that you had been here to see him at meal-time. So full of jests and banter was he that I could scarcely eat for laughing. Yet when I took courage from his good-nature to ask him concerning his plans for the future, he pretended that he did not hear me, and put an end to questioning by bidding Ulf come and play chess with him in the hut. Whether he is mad, or bewitched, or feigning like Amleth, it is not easy to tell."

"I do not think it is any of these," Rothgar said slowly. "I think it is because he likes it so well that he has got peace in which to amuse himself. Sooner would he hunt than fight, any day; and I have often seen him express pleasure in this manner. I remember how his wife Elfgiva once said of him that it was well his crown was no more than a ring of gold, for then, when his mood changed, he could use it for such a gold hoop as kings' children are wont to play with."

"Said Elfgiva of Northampton that?" Eric asked in surprise. "Never would I have believed her so wise in words. That she is the most beautiful of women, all the world knows; but I have always supposed that her wit stopped with her temper, which is suspected to be shorter than her hair."

Rothgar grunted scornfully. "It is easy for a fool to speak some wisdom if she keeps her tongue moving all the time."

Laughing, the Norwegian plunged again into the general discussion; and the son of Lodbrok stood listening discontentedly, while he kept a sharp watch of the low-browed entrance.

Presently his patience was rewarded. Within the hut there arose all at once a duet of voices, half angrily accusing, half laughingly protesting. Then the chessboard came flying through the doorway, followed by a handful of chessmen and the person of the big good-natured Jarl, still uttering his laughing protests. And finally Canute himself stood under the lintel, storming through his laughter.

"Blockhead, that you cannot keep your thoughts on what you are doing! One might expect as good a game from the tumbler's dog. Is it the drink that you have got into your head, or the war matters that you cannot get out? You deserve —"

"To lose the honor of playing with the King," the Jotun broke in, making a long step forward. "Be so good as to allow me to take his place, lord. I have some words for your ear which are worth a hearing."

"Rothgar!" the King exclaimed with great cordiality, and stepped from the doorway to meet him. "Willingly do I make the change, for I have been wishing to speak with you this last hour. I have thought of a fine plan for to-morrow's sport." Laying his arm boy-fashion across his foster-brother's shoulders, he swung him around toward the river. "But we will not go in there to do our talking. We will walk along the shore. To-night I feel as though I could walk to the rainbow-bridge." He shook back his headful of long hair and drew a deep breath, like a man from whom a burden has been lifted.

As they strolled beside the moonlit water, the son of Lodbrok listened in secret amazement to the string of plans that unfolded itself, — hunts and horse-races, swimming matches and fishing trips.

"But where will you get the fishing tackle, lord? And the hawks and the hounds for all this?" he ventured presently.

They were some little distance up the bank now, where trees screened them from the camp-fires. Sud-

denly the young King made a leaping grab at a bough overhead and hung by it, looking down at his companion with the face of a mischievous boy.

"How joyfully you will take my answer! I have sent to Northampton for them. And I have bidden Elfgiva accompany them, with all her following of maids and lap-dogs and beardless boys. Before the end of the week, I expect that the Abbey guest-house will have the appearance of a woman's bower; and the monks will have taken to the woods."

As his foster-brother stood gazing at him in speechless dismay, he laughed maliciously. "Where are your manners, partner, that you do not praise my foresight? Here am I eager to go to her to celebrate my victory; and yet because I think it unadvisable for me to leave the camp, I remain like a rock at my post. Where is your praise?"

"King," Rothgar said gravely, "is the truce going to last long enough to make it worth while to fetch those trinkets here?"

His laughter vanishing, the King came to earth in both senses of the phrase. "Now I do not know what you mean by that," he said. "You were with me on the island. You heard what was said. You heard that we made peace together to last the whole of our lives, — in truth, longer; since he who outlives is to inherit peacefully after him who dies. Did you not hear that?"

Rothgar kicked a stone out of his way with impatient emphasis. "Oh, yes, I heard it. I heard also

how you said that you would rather have the Englishman's friendship than his kingdom."

The eyebrows Canute had drawn down into a frown rose ironically. "There is room in your breast for more sense, Rothgar, my brother, if you think, because I am forced into one lie, that I never speak the truth," he said. "We will not talk of it further. I should like to remain good-humored to-night, if it were possible. What are the words you have waiting for my ears?"

The Jotun's sudden frown quite eclipsed his eyes. "It is not likely that I shall remain good-humored if I put my tongue to them. Oh! Now it becomes clear in my mind what you have sent your black-haired falcon down the wind after, — to carry your order to Northampton?"

"Certainly it is," Canute assented. "When the boy found that I had need of a messenger, he begged it of me as a boon that he might be the one to carry the good news to my lady. I thought it a well-mannered way to show his thankfulness. But why is your voice so bitter when you speak of him?"

"Because I have just found out that he is a fox," Rothgar bellowed. "Because it has been borne in upon me that he has played me a foul trick, by which I lost property that was already under my hands; lost it forever, Troll take him! if it be really true that we are to make no more warfare upon the lands south of the Watling Street."

"It is not possible!" Canute ejaculated. "He looks to be as truthful as Balder."

Rothgar uttered his favorite grunt. "Never did I hear that Loke had crooked eyes or a tusk, and black hair grows on both of them. I tell you, I know it for certain. I have just been to find the English serf who became my man after Brentford; and he has told me what he says he tried to tell the night before we left Ivarsdale, but no one would listen to him without pounding him, — that the servant-maid, who informed him concerning the provision house, spoke also of a Danish page her lord had, whom he treated with such great love that it was commonly said he was bewitched. And before that, when the brat was telling you how the Englishman had saved him from Norman's sword, it occurred to me that he talked more as a woman talks of her lover than as a man speaks of his foe. I had my mouth open to tax him with it, when you threw this duel at me like a rock and knocked everything else out of my head."

"May the gallows take my body!" the King breathed. And he sat down upon a grassy hummock as suddenly as though a rock had been thrown at him that knocked the legs from under him. Nor did he get up immediately, but remained gazing at the string of bright beads which English camp-fires made along the opposite bluff, his face intent with pondering.

Meanwhile the son of Lodbrok strode to and fro, declaiming wrathfully. "There is not an honest bone in the imp's body," he wound up. "It is certainly my

belief that he was in league with the Englishman; and his freedom was the reward he got for drawing me off."

"Certainly you are a very shrewd man," Canute murmured. But something in his voice did not stand firm; his foster-brother darted him a keen glance. His suspicions were well founded. Canute's face was crimson with suppressed laughter; he was biting his lips frantically to hold back his mirth. The temper of the son of Lodbrok left him in one inarticulate snarl. Turning on his heel, with a whirlwind of flying cloak and a thunder of clashing weapons, he would have stalked away if the King had not made him the most peremptory of gestures.

"No, wait! Wait, good brother! I will show you whether I offend you intentionally or not! It is — it is—the—the jest—" Again he became unintelligible.

Rothgar stopped, but it was to glower over his folded arms. "Do you think I do not know as well as you that I behaved like a fool? What I dislike is that you cannot see as plainly that your ward is a troll. Because his womanish face has caught your fancy, you will neither blame him yourself nor allow others to make a fuss — "

"That is where you are wrong," the King interrupted, with as much gravity as he could command. "When Fridtjof Frodesson comes again into your presence, I give you leave to take whatever revenge you like. Lash him with your tongue or your belt, as you will; and I promise that I will not lift finger to hinder you from it."

"And not hold it against me?" Rothgar demanded incredulously.

"And not hold it against you," Canute agreed. Then he tilted his head back to laugh openly in the other's face. "Will you wager a finger-ring against my knife that your mind will not change when my ward stands again before you?"

The Jotun smiled grimly. "Is that the expectation you are stringing your bow with? It will fail you as surely as the hair of Hother's wife failed him. The wager shall be as you have made it; and may I lack strength if I do not deal with him—" He paused, blinking like a startled owl, as his royal foster-brother leaped to his feet and fronted him with shouts of laughter.

"You dolt, you!" Canute cried. "Do you not see it yet? Frode's child is a woman!"

Rothgar's jaw dropped and his bulging eyes seemed in danger of following. "What!" he gasped; and then his voice rose to a roar. "And the Englishman is her lover?"

"You are wiser than I expected," the King laughed. "I intend to call you Thrym after this, for it is unlikely that Loke made a greater fool of the Giant. Your enemies will make derisive songs about it."

Stamping with rage, the Jotun hammered his huge fist upon a tree-trunk until bark flew in every direction. "King, I will give you every ring off my hand if you will give me leave to strangle her!"

"You remind me that I will take one of your rings now," Canute said, reaching out and opening the mallet-like fist that he might make his choice. Then, as he fitted on his prize and held it critically to the light, he added with more sympathy: "I will arrange for you a more profitable revenge than that. I will make a condition with Edmund that the Ethel-ing's odal shall not be included in the land which is peace-holy, and that to ravage it shall not be looked upon as breaking the truce. Then can you betake yourself thither and sit down with your following, and have no one but yourself to blame if you fail a second time. Only," — he thrust his knuckles suddenly between the other's ribs, — "only, before we get serious over it, do at least give one laugh. Though she be Ran herself, the maiden has played an excellent joke upon you."

"I do not see how you make out that it is all upon me," Rothgar said sulkily. "It did not appear that you got suspicious in any way, until I told you myself what she talked like. You did not have the appearance of choking much on her stories."

The King seemed all at once to recover his dignity. "I will not deny that," he said gravely; "and have I not said that I expect to be angry about it presently? Certainly I do not think she has treated me with much respect. That she did not tell you, is by no means to be wondered at; it might even count as something in her favor. But me she should have given her confidence. That she should dare to offer

her King that lying story about her sister's death — " His face flushed as though he were remembering his emotion on receiving that same story; and his foster-brother's observation did not tend to mollify him.

" And not only to offer it," the son of Lodbrok chuckled, " but to cram it down his throat and make him swallow it."

Canute's heels also began to ring with ominous sharpness upon the frosty ground. " She must be Ran herself! Oh, you need not be afraid that I shall not get overbearing enough after I am started! Had she been no more than her father's daughter, her behavior would have been sufficiently bad; but that she whom I had made my ward should withhold her confidence from me to give it to an Englishman! Become his thrallwoman, by Odin, and betray my people for his sake! Now, as I am a king, I will punish her in a way that she will like less than strangling! I tell you, her luck is great that she is not here to-night."

CHAPTER XIX

THE GIFT OF THE ELVES

> Fair shall speak
> And money offer,
> Who would obtain a woman's love.
>
> HÁVAMÁL.

IT was the edge of a forest pool, and a slender dark-haired girl bending from the brink to see herself in the still water. Looking, she smiled,—and small wonder! Below her, framed in green rushes, was the reflection of a high-born maiden dressed according to her rank. Clinging silk and jewelled girdle lent new grace to her lithesome form, while the mossy green of her velvet mantle brought out the rich coloring of her face as leaves bring out the glowing splendor of a rose. Gold was in the embroidery that stiffened her trailing skirts; gold was sewn into her gloves, and golden chains twined in her lustrous hair added to the spirited poise of her head a touch of stateliness. No wonder that her mouth curved into a smile as she gazed.

"It cannot be denied that I look woman-like now," she murmured. "It is a great boon for me that he likes my hair."

Then the water lost both the reflection and the face above it as a sweet voice sounded up the bank, calling, "Randalin! Randalin!"

Picking up the branchful of scarlet berries which she had dropped, Frode's daughter moved toward the voice. "Are they about to go, Dearwyn?" she asked the little gentlewoman who came toward her around a hawthorn bush, lifting her silken skirts daintily.

Dearwyn shook her head. "My lady wishes to try on you the wreath she has made. She thinks your dark locks will set it off better than our light ones."

"I was on my way thither," Randalin said, quickening her steps.

With timid friendliness in her pretty face, Dearwyn waited, and the Danish girl gave her a shy smile when at last they stood side by side; but their acquaintanceship did not appear to have reached the point of conversation, for they walked back in silence to the spot where the Lady Elfgiva's train had halted on its journey for a noonday meal and rest.

Along the bank of a pebbly stream, between pickets of mounted guards, the troop of holiday-folk was strung in scattered groups. Yonder, a body of the King's huntsmen struggled with braces of leashed hounds. Here were gathered together the falconers bearing the King's birds. Nearer, a band of grooms led the King's blooded horses to the water. And nearer yet, where

the sun lay warm on a leafy glade, the King's beautiful "Danish wife" took her nooning amid her following of maids and of pages, of ribboned wenches and baggage-laden slaves.

As her glance fell upon this last picture, Randalin drew a quick breath of admiration.

While they waited for the bondwomen to restore to the hampers the crystal goblets and gold-fringed napkins that even in the wood wastes must minister to such delicate lips, one merry little lady was launching fleets of beech-nut rinds down the stream; another, armed with a rush-spear, was making bold attack on the slumbers of some woodland creature which she had spied out basking on the sunny side of a stump; and in the centre of the open, the Lady Elfgiva was amusing herself with the treasures of red and gold leaves which silk-clad pages were bringing from the thicket.

Gazing at her, Randalin's admiration mounted to wistfulness. "Were I like that, I should be sure of his feeling toward me," she sighed.

Certainly, as she looked to-day sitting under the towering trees, it was easy to understand why the King's wife had been named "the gift of the elves." Every lovely thing in Nature had been robbed to make her, and only fairy fingers could have woven the sun's gold into such tresses, or made such eyes from a scrap of June sky and a spark of opal fire. From the crown of her jewelled hair to the toe of her little red shoe, there was not one line misplaced, one curve forgotten, while her motions were as graceful as blowing willows.

When the pair came toward her over the carpet of leather-hued leaves, she put out a white hand in beckoning. "Come here, my Valkyria, and let me try if I can make you look still more like a gay bird from over the East Sea."

"You have made me look a very splendid bird, lady," Randalin said gratefully, as she knelt to receive the woodland crown.

Elfgiva patted the brown cheeks in acknowledgment, and also in delight at the effect of her handiwork. "You are an honor to my art. Do you know that the night before you came to me I dreamed I held a burning candle in my hand, and that is known by everybody to be a sign of good. A hundred plans are in my mind against the time that this peace shall be over, and we are obliged to return to that loathful house where we suffer so much with dulness that the quarrels of my little brats are the only excitement we have."

Still kneeling for the white fingers to pat and pull at her head-dress, Randalin looked up wonderingly. "Is it your belief that King Canute will not carry out his intention, lady, that you say 'when the peace is over'? I know for certain that it is expected to last forever."

"Forever?" The lady's voice was an echo of sweet mockery. "Take half a kingdom when a whole lies almost within his reach? Now I will not deny that the King is sometimes boyish of mood, but rarely that foolish." She seemed to toss the idea from her with the leaves she shook from her robe as she rose and moved back a step to see the wreath from a new point. "Turn

your head this way, child. Yes, there is still one thing wanting on this side; berries if I have them, or grasses if I have not, — here are more berries! Oh, yes, I declare that I expect to be very merry through your spirits! You shall have the rule over my pages and devise games and junketings without end."

Humming gayly, she began to weave in the bright berries; and it struck Randalin that here was a good opportunity to make the plea she had in her mind. She said gravely, "I shall be thankful if you are able to manage it, lady, so that I may go back with you."

Pausing in her work, Elfgiva looked down in surprise. "Now what should prevent?" she asked.

The girl colored a little as she answered: "It was in the King's mind once, lady, that a good way to dispose of Randalin, Frode's daughter, would be to marry her to the son of Lodbrok. If he should still keep that opinion — I would prefer to die!" she ended abruptly.

But the King's wife laughed her rippling laughter that had in it all the music of falling waters. "Shed no tears over that, ladybird! Would I be apt to let such an odious bear as Rothgar Lodbroksson rob me of my newest plaything? Whence to my dulness a pastime but for your help? Though he were the King's blood-brother, he should tell for naught. You do not guess half the entertainment your wild ways will be to me. I expect it will be more pleasant for me to have you than that Norman ape which Canute sent me at the beginning of the summer, — which is dead now, unfortunately, because Harald would insist upon shooting

his arrows into it. There! Now my work could not be improved upon." Again she moved back, her beautiful head tilted in birdlike examination. Randalin arose slowly and stood before her with widening eyes.

But it was not long that the Lady of Northampton had for her or for the wreath. Now her attention was attracted to the farthest group of guards and huntsmen, whose motions and shouting seemed to indicate some unusual commotion. Bending, she peered curiously under the branches. "I wonder if it has happened that the King has sent someone to meet us?" she exclaimed.

"I see a gleam of scarlet, lady," the maiden of the riverbank came to tell her eagerly.

But even as Elfgiva was turning to despatch a page for news, the throng of moving figures parted, and from it two horsemen emerged and rode toward them. One was the mighty son of Lodbrok, clad in the scarlet mantle and gilded mail of the King's guard. The other, who wore no armor at all, only feasting-clothes of purple velvet, was the King himself.

The whole troop of butterfly pages rushed forward to take possession of the horses; the little gentlewomen made a fluttering group behind their mistress; and Elfgiva, laughing in sweetest mockery, swept back her rosy robes in a lowly reverence.

"Hail, lord of half a kingdom but of the whole of my heart!" she greeted him.

Canute seemed to drink in her fairness like wine; his face was boyish in its radiance as he leaped from his horse before her. "What! The first word a gibe?"

he cried, then caught her in his arms and stilled her silvery laughter with his lips.

It was so charming a picture that Randalin smiled in sympathy, where she stood a little way behind the young wife, awaiting the moment when the King should have leisure to discover her. Not the faintest doubt of his friendliness was in her mind. She was still smiling, when at last he raised his head and looked at her over Elfgiva's shoulder.

Then alas, the smile died, murdered, on her lips.

Turning, Canute beckoned to the son of Lodbrok, who was enduring the scene with the same stolid resignation which he displayed toward his chief's other follies. "Foster-brother, how comes it that you do not follow my example and embrace the bride that I have given you?"

As ice breaks and reveals sullen waters underneath, so stolidity broke in Rothgar's face. With a harsh laugh, he strode forward.

Perhaps it was to follow the King's suggestion, perhaps it was only to vent his reproaches; but Randalin did not wait to see. Before she knew how she got there, she was at Elfgiva's side, clutching at her mantle.

"Lady! You promised me —" she cried.

And for all her chiming laughter, Elfgiva's silken arm was stretched out like a bar. "No further, good Giant!" she said gayly. "The King gave what was not his, for this toy has become mine." She turned to Canute with a little play of smiling pouts, very bewitch-

ing on such lips. "Fie, my lord! Be pleased to call your wolves off my lambs."

Plainly, Canute's frown was unable to withstand such witcheries. Despite himself he laughed, and his voice was more persuasive than commanding. "Now he will not rob you of the girl, my Shining One. Once he has wedded her, you may keep her until you tire. It was only because —"

But there he stopped, for all at once a mist had come over the heavenly eyes, and the smiling lips had drawn themselves into a trembling bunch. The sweet voice too was subtly tremulous.

"It is because you are to a greater degree anxious to please him than me, though it is a whole year that I have pined away, day and night, in the utmost loneliness. Wel-a-way! What! Why have you troubled to send for me, if you hold my happiness so lightly that you will not comply with me in so small a matter?" Bridling softly, she was turning away, when the young King threw up his hands in good-humored surrender.

"To this I will quickly reply that my shield does not secure me against tears! If it is not to your wish we will not speak of it. Give back, foster-brother, and choose two of the others to be your drinking-companions. Look up, my fair one, and admit that I am the most obedient of your thralls. Never, on former days or since, have I so much as kicked one of your little yelping dogs, though I hate them as Stark Otter hated bells."

Sunshine through the mist, Elfgiva laughed. "Nay, but you have them drowned when I am not looking," she retorted.

He did not take the trouble to deny it; indeed he laughed as though the accusation was especially apt. "Have I ever wounded you more deeply than a trinket would cure?" he demanded.

And behold, she had already forgotten the matter, to catch at the huge arm-ring which was slipping up and down his sleeve, so loose a fit was it. "What Grendel's neck did you take it from! If it had but an opening, I could use it for a belt."

Smiling, the King looked down on his monster bracelet. "That," he said, "does not altogether do me credit, for it shows the difference in girth between me and Edmund Ironside. When we set the peace between us, we exchanged ornaments and weapons. Think if we had followed the custom in every respect and exchanged garments likewise!"

Elf-fires were in Elfgiva's blue eyes when she raised them to his. "Rule your words so that no one else hears you say that, bright Lord of the Danes," she murmured, "lest they think you mean by it that the English crown would fit you as loosely, and forget that you are a boy who will grow."

The King's mouth sobered. "Nay, a man, who has got his growth."

Her little hand spurned the ring that the instant before it had caressed. "Not a man, but a King!" she reminded him, and drew herself up proudly be-

fore him, a queen in beauty, crowned with the sun's gold.

His eyes devoured her; his breath seemed to come faster as he looked. All at once he caught her hands and crushed them against his lips. "Neither man nor king," he cried, "but the lover who has adored you since he came to plunder but stayed to woo! Do you know that when I came upon you to-day, my heart burst into flower as a tree blooms in the spring-time? Had I a harp in my hand, my lips would blossom into song. Get me one from your minstrels, and I will sing to you as we ride, and we will forget that a day has passed since the time when first we roved together through the Northampton meadows."

Forgetful of all the world beside, he led her away toward the horses.

CHAPTER XX

A ROYAL RECKONING

A tale is always half told if only one man tells it.

GRETTI'S SAGA.

HETHER from policy or necessity, the guest-house of Gloucester Abbey was surrendered to the royal band with open-armed hospitality. Every comfort the place afforded was heaped together to soften the bare rooms for the accommodation of the noble ladies; every delicacy the epicurean abbot could obtain loaded the table; and what little grass the frost had left in the cloister garth was sacrificed to the swarm of pages and henchmen, minstrels and tumblers. Now a tournament of games in the riverside meadows took up the day, now a pageant up the river itself; again, a ride with the hawks or a run after the hounds, — and the nights were one long revel. Time slipped by like a song off the lips of a harper.

To-day it was to chase a boar over the wooded hills that the holiday troop was awake and stirring at sun-

rise. The silvery bell-notes that called the monks to morning prayer were jostled in mid-air by the blare of hunters' horns. Stamping iron-shod hoofs and the baying of deep-voiced hounds broke the stillness of the cloister, and threescore merry voices laughed out of memory the Benedictine vow of silence.

Voices and horns made a joyous uproar when the King led forth his lady and her fair following; and he smiled with pleasure at the welcome and the picturesque beauty of the gay throng between the gray old walls.

"Now how could I come upon a better sight if I were the King of a hundred islands?" he demanded of Elfgiva.

But he did not wait for her answer; instead, he stepped forward as though to avoid it and put a question to one of his huntsmen. And his wife turned and spoke sharply to the blond maiden behind her, whose more than usual fairness had given her the name of Candida, or "the white one."

"Where is Randalin? I sent the garments to her an hour ago. She stands in need of a taste of Teboen's rod to teach her promptness."

Little Dearwyn, watching the doorway with fluttering color, cried out eagerly, "Here she is, lady!"

There she was, in truth, standing on the threshold with crimson cheeks and flashing eyes. At the sight of her every huntsman uttered a whistle of amazement, then settled into an admiring stare; and Canute, glancing over his shoulder, laughed outright.

"What!" he said. "Have you tired of woman's clothes already?"

For, once more, Frode's daughter was attired in a man's short tunic and long silken hose. It was a suit much richer than the old one, since silver embroidery banded the blue, and precious furs lined the cloak; but that fact was evidently of little comfort to her, as her eyes were full of angry tears, and she deigned the King no answer whatever.

"I am obliged to pay dearly for your amusement, lady," she said bitterly.

Elfgiva chimed her bell-like laughter. "I will not deny that you pay liberally for my trouble, sweet. Does it not add spice to her stories, maidens, to see her habited thus? She looks like one of the fairy lords Teboen is wont to sing of."

"She holds her head like Emma of Normandy," the King said absently.

In wide-eyed surprise, Elfgiva looked up at him. "Ethelred's widow? Never did I hear that you had seen her! Why has this been passed over in silence? I have abundance of questions to ask about her garments and her appearance. When saw you her? And where?"

Canute stirred uneasily. "It is not worth a hearing. I spoke but a few words with her, about ransoms, the time that I sat before London. And I remember only that her bearing was noble and her countenance most handsome, such as I had never seen before, nor did I think that there could be any woman so queenlike."

Because he did not choose to say more, or because some wrinkle in Elfgiva's satin brow warned him off, he turned hastily to another topic. "Foolishly do we linger, when we have none too much time to get to covert. Do you still want your way about accompanying us? I have warned you that a boar hunt is little like hawking; nor do Northmen stand in one spot and wait for game to come to them."

"I hold to it with both hands," the lady returned with a gayety which had in it a touch of defiance. "Nor will I consent to do anything except that alone. We will partake in the excitement of your sport, and each of these brave heroes of yours shall answer for the safety of one of us." A gesture of her hand included Thorkel the Tall, the two Northern jarls, and the King's foster-brother.

"And is it your belief that a man can at the same time chase a boar and talk fine words to a woman?" Canute demanded between amusement and impatience. "Call it a ride, if you will, but leave the boar out for reason's sake, as he would leave us out ere we were so much as on his track."

She gave him a sidelong glimpse of her wonderful eyes, and drooped her head like a lily grown heavy on its stem. "Would that be so great a misfortune then?" she murmured. "Do you think it unpleasant to be passing your time at my side?"

Smiling, he watched the play of her long silken lashes, yet shook his head. "Nay, when I hunt, I hunt," he said. "I would have idled in your bower if

you had chosen it, but you urged me to this, and now if it happens that you cannot keep up, you must bear your deed."

As one casts aside an ill-fitting glove, she threw aside her pouts, looking up at him with a flash of dainty mimicry. "Hear the fiery Thor! Take notice that I shall bear all down before me like a man mowing ripe corn. You cannot guess how much warlikeness I have caught from my Valkyria." She glanced back where the girl in the short tunic stood drawing on her gloves, a picture of stormy beauty.

Amused, the King's eyes followed hers, then lighted with sudden purpose. "As you will," he laughed, "and I will give your Valkyria a steed that shall match her appearance." Advancing again, he spoke to a groom; and the signal set the whole party in motion.

Randalin heard his words, but at the moment she was too deep in angry embarrassment to heed them. It seemed to her that every eye in the throng was fastened upon her as she walked forward, that every mouth buzzed comment behind her. It was not until she was in the saddle that his intention reached her understanding.

The powerful black charger, which a groom led toward her, had been pawing and arching his glossy neck impatiently since the first horn set his blood-drops dancing; at the touch of her foot upon the stirrup, he snorted satisfaction through his wide-flaring nostrils and would have leaped forward like a stone from a

sling, if the man had not hung himself upon the bit. The girl awoke to surprise as she barely managed to reach her seat by the most agile of springs.

"This is not the horse I ride, Dudda! He must belong to one of the nobles."

"He is — the horse — that King Canute said — you should take," the man panted, as he struggled to keep his footing. "He said to fetch — Praise Odin!" For at that moment, Canute's silver horn gave the signal, and he was free to leap aside.

Randalin's trained hand upon the reins was as firm as it was light, and her trained eye was keenly alert to every motion of the black ears, but in her brain all was whirling confusion, — and no longer any thought of her tunic. What was the King's purpose in making this change? Certainly he was in no mood to honor her, — what could he have in his mind? While her tongue answered mechanically to Ulf Jarl's observations concerning the weather and the fair farmland they were riding through, her eyes were furtively examining her companions' steeds. No fiery ambitions disturbed their easy gait, spirited though they were. Indeed, Elfgiva, looking back at this moment, singled her out with a rippling laugh.

"By the blessed Ethelberga, you have a horse in all respects befitting your spirit, my shield-maiden! I hope it is not the King's intention to punish you by frightening you."

Could it be possible that he should stoop to so unworthy an action, the girl asked herself? And yet it

was as understandable as any of his behavior during the last fortnight. Suddenly it seemed that a hand had awakened the Viking blood which slumbered in her veins; it fired her cheeks and flashed from under her lashes. She answered clearly, "I hope it is not, lady, — for he would experience disappointment."

From all sides laughter went up; but there was no time for more, for now a hunter — one of the men who had brought news of the lair — galloped up, dust-choked and breathless.

"He has broken cover, King!" he gasped. "He is moving windward — loose the hounds — or — you will — miss him —"

Canute's horn was at his lips before the last broken phrase was out. "Forward!" he shouted with a blast. "The hounds, and forward!" A whirlwind seemed to strike the ambling train and sweep them over the ground like autumn leaves.

Over stubble fields and leaf-carpeted lanes, with half frightened smiles upon their parted lips, Elfgiva and her fair ones kept up bravely; then across a stream into a thicket, over hollows and fallen logs, under low-hanging boughs, through brush and brier and bramble, — leaping, dodging, tearing, crashing. Leonorine the Timid uttered a cry, as her horse slid down a bank with his feet bunched under him; and the Lady Elfgiva dropped her reins to press her hand where a thorn had scratched her cheek.

"Stop!" she commanded. "Stop! We will turn back and wait — until he strikes across a field."

As well have tried to call off the hounds after they had caught the scent and doubled themselves over the trail! It is unlikely that any man so much as heard her. For one flash of time she beheld them seesawing in the air before her, as their horses rose over the brush; then there was nothing but the distant crashing of dry timber and the echo of Canute's jubilant horn.

"And the Valkyria has gone also!" the lady ejaculated, when her injured gaze was able to come sufficiently close to earth.

And so the Valkyria had, though with as little of free will as on that day when her runaway steed carried her out of the press of the fleeing army. At the first call of the horn, Black Ymer had taken the bronze bit between his teeth and followed, and his rider's one concern in life became — not the guiding of him — but the staying on. Before they left the first thicket her mantle was torn from her shoulders, and she was lying along his neck, now on this side, now on that, to escape the whipping twigs that lashed at her, threatening to cut out her eyes. From the thicket out into the open, where it seemed as if the wind that rushed against her would blow not only the clothes from her body but the flesh from her bones!

Far ahead, where the little valley ended and the wood began again, she caught a fleeting glimpse of the boar as it burst covert with the yelping pack at its heels and was for one instant revealed, snarling, bare-tusked, and flecked with bloody foam. Then it dived again under cover and was gone in a new direction. Canute's

horn sounded a recall, and one by one the hunters checked their onward rush and wheeled.

Black Ymer's rider also tried to obey, but all the strength of her body was not enough to sway him by a hair's breadth. On he shot into the thicket.

"He will have enough sense to stop when he finds out that he is alone," was her despairing thought.

But he continued to forge ahead like a race horse, — in uneven leaps as though some sound from behind were urging him on. Suddenly, through the roaring of her ears, it broke upon her that he was not alone, that at least one horse was following. Its approaching tread was like thunder in the stillness. If it could but get ahead of her, all would be well. Her heart beat hopefully as the jar sounded nearer and nearer. When the snorting nostrils seemed at the Black One's very flank, at the risk of her neck she turned her head.

Looking, she understood why a steed had been given her which should carry her out of Elfgiva's reach, for the horseman who was even now stretching his gauntleted hand toward her rein was the King himself. No one followed, and the forest around them was silent as a vault. At last, he was free to speak his mind.

Under the drag of his hand, the horse came slowly to a halt and stood panting and trembling in the middle of a little dell. For a while, she could do no more than cling to the saddle-bow, sick with dizziness.

Still holding her rein, her royal guardian sat regarding her critically. "Now it seems to me that your boasting is less than before," he said. "And you were

mistaken in supposing that I would have given this animal to you if I had not known you could ride him." When she made no reply, he shook the rein impatiently. "Is it still the horse that makes you heavy in your breathing? Or perhaps you scarcely dare to face my justice? I warn you that I shall not take it well if you begin to weep."

A spark was drawn out of her by that. With an effort, she raised her head and shot him a glance from bright angry eyes. "No such intention have I, Lord King. Certainly I do not fear your justice. Why should I?"

"Since I have little time to spend upon your freaks, I will tell you why," he said sternly. "Because you have betrayed one of my people for the sake of an Englishman."

With surprise, her glance wavered. "I did not know you knew that," she said slowly. But, as he expected her to droop, she bristled instead. "Nor was it to be expected, Lord King, that you would be the one to blame me for using craft."

His eyes kindled; if she had stopped there it might have gone hard with her, but she spoke on swiftly, her head indignantly erect. "If Rothgar Lodbroksson thinks he should have indemnity because he was too stupid to see through a trick, let him have Avalcomb, when you get it back from the English, and feel that he has got more than he deserves; but your anger—" she broke off abruptly and sat with her lips pressed tight as though keeping back a sob. "In the beginning,

I got great kindness at your hands, Lord King," she said at last, "and your anger — hurts me!"

On the point of softening, the King's face hardened, and he averted his head. "You value my favor rather late in the day, Frode's daughter. It would have been better if you had shown honor to it when you came in to me at Scoerstan, by giving me truth in return for friendship."

If she had laughed as though recalling the jest in that scene, it is possible that he would have struck her with his glove. It was fortunate that her sense of humor was no more than a bubble on the foam of her high spirits. Her eyes were dark with earnestness as they sought his.

"Lord King, I was hindered by necessity. Your camp — was it a place for women? And did not your own mouth tell me that Randalin, Frode's daughter, should wed the son of Lodbrok if she were alive?"

He struck his knee a ringing slap. "I confess that it is not easy to be a match for you! But I can tell you one thing which you will not be able to explain, as heretofore, — and it is a thing which has made me get bitterest against you. If you had kept your confidence from all it might have passed for discreetness, but that you should keep it from me to give it to an Englishman —"

"But I did not give it to the Englishman," she interrupted.

For an instant he stared at her; directly after he burst into a loud laugh. "Now that is the best

thing that has occurred yet! Where you cannot crawl through, you break through!" He laughed again, and was opening his mouth to repeat some of the suspicions he had shared with Rothgar when something about her stopped him, — whether it was the way she bore her head or something in her deep eyes. Dropping his derision, he spoke bluntly: "What reason in the world could cause you to behave thus if it is not that he is your lover?"

The color gathered and spread over her face in maiden shame, until her tunic became the cruelest of mockeries.

"Short is the reason to tell, Lord King," she said, "it is because I love him." As he sat regarding her, she put out her hand and played with a tendril of wild grapevine that hung from the tree beside her, her eyes following her fingers. "I do not know why I should be ashamed of the state of my feelings. I should not be able to stand alive before you if he had not been a better lord to me than you are to English captives; and he is more gentle and high-minded than any man I ever heard sung of. Sometimes I think I should have more to be ashamed of if I did not feel love toward him." A little defiantly, she raised her eyes to his, only to drop them back to the spray. "But he does not love me. He knows me only as the boy he was kind to. I have given him the high-seat in my heart, but I sit only within the door of his."

The forest seemed very still when she had done, — the only sound the clanking of the bits as the horses

cropped the withered grass. Then suddenly the King gathered up his lines with a jerk.

"I cannot believe it," he said harshly. "You are all alike, you women, with your cat-like purrings and tricksy eyes that surpass most other things in deceit. I do not deny both that you know well how to feign and that I would like to believe you, but you must prove it first before I do."

"How can I do that, lord?" she said helplessly; but shrank, the next moment, as she saw that already he had a plan in his mind.

Moving his horse a step nearer, he bent toward her triumphantly. "I will send for the Englishman, in your name — or the name you wore — and you shall meet him in my presence, and I shall be able to tell from his manner whether or not you have spoken truthfully."

Send for him! At the very thought her face was ecstatic with happiness. Then she clasped her hands in dismay. "But not if I must continue in these garments, lord! You can decide over my fate, but I will never face him again in anything but woman's weeds."

The King frowned. "Strangely do you speak; as if I did not know what is befitting a Danish woman that I would allow one who is noble-born in all her kindred to be treated disgracefully after I had taken her into my wardership!"

A while longer he sat there, watching her changeful face with its lovely mouth and the eyes that some trick of light and shade had deepened to the purple of

an iris petal's markings; and the sight seemed to gentle his mood.

"I should like to reconcile myself to you," he said slowly. "Since first you came before me and showed by your entreaty that you thought me something besides an animal, I have felt friendliness toward you. And I should like to believe that some woman loves some man as you say you love this Englishman." Out of the very wishfulness of his voice, a terrible menace spoke: "I should like it so much that I shall neither spare you in word nor deed if you have deceived me!" Then once more his manner softened. "Yet my mind feels a kind of faith toward you. I shall try you, to make sure, but until you have proved that you are unworthy of it, I will not keep you out of my friendship." Drawing off his glove, he stretched forth his hand. "You may find that a man's harshness is little worse than a woman's guile," he said bitterly.

Dimly guessing what was in his mind, she dared not trust herself to words but told her gratitude with her eyes, as she returned his clasp. Then he sent her back by the one semblance of a path which ran through the forest, and himself rode on to his hunters.

CHAPTER XXI

WITH THE JOTUN AS CHAMBERLAIN

All doorways,
Before going forward,
Should be looked to;
For difficult it is to know
Where foes may sit
Within a dwelling.

HÁVAMÁL.

ONCE more, Lord Sebert, be exhorted to turn back," old Morcard spurred forward to offer a last remonstrance as the city gates yawned before them. "Even if the message be genuine, you are putting your life in peril. If men speak rightly, Gloucester Town is no better than a camp of carousing Danes. Is it likely that they care enough about this peace to stick at so small a thing as man-slaying?"

The Etheling replied without slackening his pace: "I do not think they are liable to molest a peaceful traveller. I will take care that I upheave no strife, and I will make all my inquiries of the monks."

"Go a little more slowly, lord, and consider the other side of it," the old cniht entreated. "Suppose the message is false, — the black tress around it proves nothing. Suppose the son of Lodbrok has spread a net for you?"

"Then should I keep on my way still more lustily," the Lord of Ivarsdale answered, "for his making use of the boy's name to entice me would show that he had discovered our friendship, in which case the youngling would be suffering from his anger."

The old man plucked violently at his beard as the walls loomed clearer before them. "Lord, you have already gone through some risk in leaving home. It is by no means impossible that Edmund will fall upon the Tower during your absence."

"Edmund is too busy with big game at Oxford to have that trouble about such quarry as I," the young man said lightly, "and the Gainer is not likely to stir far from Edmund while land is being distributed." Then, sobering, he gave the other a grave glance over his shoulder. "Even though the errand for danger could not be accomplished, how could I do less than undertake it? Did not the boy go through some risk for me when he betrayed his own countryman to get me out of a hard place? Had they guessed his treason, they would have torn him in pieces. I owe him a debt which it concerns my honor to pay. It lies not on your shoulders, however, —" his gravity gave way to his gay smile, — "if it is more pleasant for you not to enter the city, you may ride

back to the hostelry we passed, and await me in its shelter."

The old cniht's courage was too well approved to require any defence. Contenting himself with an indignant grunt, he reined back to his place at the head of the dozen armed servants who formed the Etheling's safeguard, and the young lord galloped on between the bare fields, humming absently under his breath.

"Poor bantling!" he was thinking compassionately. "I shall be right glad to get sight of him again. I hope he will not betray himself in his joy when he sees me. Anything like showing that one is fond of him is apt to turn him a little soft."

None of these undercurrents was visible in his face however, when, having left his escort in one of the outer courts, he stood at last in the parlor of the Abbey guest-house.

"I am a traveller, reverend brother, journeying from London to Worcester," he said with grave courtesy to the gaunt black-robed monk who admitted him. "And my errand hither is to ask refreshment for myself and my men, as we have been in the saddle since cockcrow."

"The brother whose duty it is to attend upon travellers is at this hour in the Chapter House, with the rest of the household," the monk made answer. "When he comes forth, I will acquaint him with your needs. Until then, bide here, and I will bring you a morsel to stay your stomach."

Sebert smiled his satisfaction as the sandals pattered away. He had foreseen this interval of waiting,

— indeed, he had timed his arrival to gain it, — and it was his design to put it to good use. While he swallowed what he wanted of the wafers and wine which were brought him, he took measure of the reverend servitor, with the result that, as he set down the goblet, he ventured a question.

"From the numbers and heaps of attendants I saw in the outer courts, holy brother, it appears that this season of peace has in no way lessened the tax on your generosity. Is rumor right in declaring the Danish King to be one of the guests of your bounty?"

Either it was the agreeable presence of the young noble which relaxed the Benedictine's austerity, or else the fact that Sebert had left half his wine in his cup. The holy man answered with unwonted readiness.

"Rumor, which is the mother of lies, has given birth to one truth, noble stranger. The King whom a chastening Providence has set over the northern half of the Island, has been our guest for the space of four weeks,—together with the gold-bought English woman who is known as his 'Danish wife.'" The monk's watery eyes were rolled upward in pious disapproval, before he turned them earthward with a sigh of resignation. "Nevertheless, it is the will of Heaven, — and he is very open-handed with lands and gold when his meals please him." He cast a thirsty glance toward the half-filled goblet which Sebert was absently fingering. "If you have eagerness for a sight of him, you have but to walk through the galleries until you come

to the garden in which he is fleeting his time with his women."

"Now I think I should like to take a look at him while I am waiting," the Etheling assented, rising gravely. "Should Edmund be the first to pay the debt of nature, which God avert! the Dane will become my King also. Is it this door that commands the cloister?"

"The door on your left," the monk corrected; and shuffled away lest some envious chance should snatch the cup from him before his thirsty throat could close on the sweet remnant.

At the moment that he was making sure of his booty in the safe darkness of a passage, the Lord of Ivarsdale was pursuing his object along the chill enclosure of the gallery. The November sunlight that, unsoftened by any filter of rich-tinted glass, fell coldly upon the worn stone, showed the carrels beneath the windows to be one and all deserted by their monkish occupants, and he strode along unhampered by curious eye or ear.

"After all this luck," he congratulated himself, "it will go hard with me if I do not either stumble on the youngling himself, or someone who can give me news of him."

He had no more than thought it, when the sound reached him of a door closing somewhere along the next side of the square, followed by the clank of spurred feet coming heavily toward him. As they drew nearer, the rattle of a sword also became audible. Lifting his eyebrows dubiously, the Etheling grasped his own weapon beneath his cloak.

When the feet had brought their owner around the corner into sight, he did not feel that his motion had been a mistaken one, for the man who was advancing was Rothgar Lodbroksson. It flashed through Sebert's mind that the old cniht's forebodings had not been without cause, and that Ivarsdale was in danger of changing masters by a process much quicker than a month's siege. He stared in amazement when the Dane, instead of flashing out his blade, stopped short with a burst of jeering laughter.

"Here is the Englishman arrived, and he looks small enough now!" he cried in his thunderous voice. "Has it happened that I am to be the bower-thane who is to fetch you in!"

Sebert's grasp tightened around his hilt. Apparently the son of Lodbrok was expecting him! Yet even on a forlorn hope, he deemed it wise not to commit himself. He said with what haughtiness he could muster, "What should a plain traveller want with a bower-thane, Danishman? I stand in more need of the cellarer who is to provide me with a meal."

Another jeering outburst interrupted him. "Now I say nothing against it if you declare yourself looking for sweetmeats! Well, I will be the cellarer, and lead you to them."

"I do not understand you," Sebert said slowly, and quite truthfully.

The Dane grinned at him. "I mean that I will fetch you in to the one who sent you the summons."

"The one who sent you the summons?" Certainly

that sounded as though he were using the words to conceal a name. Neither the Etheling's patience nor his temper was long enough to reach below the knee. He made a swift gesture of throwing aside all reserve. "Enough of mystery, Danishman! If the message which I have received was not sent by Fridtjof Frodesson, it was sent by you. Be honest enough to admit it and say plainly what your intention is toward me."

"Fridtjof Frodesson," the Jotun mocked, and his fiery eyes probed the Englishman like knives. "Now since honesty is to your wish, I will go so far as to confess that the word came neither from Frode's son nor from me."

Sebert's foot rang upon the ground. "Say then that the Devil sent it, and a truce to this juggling! Since you know that I am the boy's friend, you understand that any harm he has suffered is a harm to me, and that my sword is equally ready to avenge it."

Much to his surprise, the Dane accorded this challenge no notice whatever. He stood studying the Lord of Ivarsdale with eyes in which malicious amusement was growing into open mirth. It came out in another laugh.

"Now it would be more unlikely than the wonder which has occurred, yet I begin to believe you! I myself will guide you to your Fridtjof, only for the pleasure of watching your face. The Fates are no such stepmothers after all!" He turned in the direction from which he had come and made the other a sign. "This

way, — if you dare to follow. I am not afraid to go first, so you need give no thought of the chances of steel between your ribs."

The Etheling took his hand off his weapon with a twinge of shame; but he was not without misgivings as he strode along at Rothgar's heels. Unless the youngling had made a decided change for the worse, what satisfaction could the Jotun expect to get from witnessing their meeting? Before his mind, there rose again the tear-stained boyish face which had bidden him farewell that night at the postern, and his pulses throbbed with a fierce pity.

"He took himself from the one person who was dear to him, poor little cub," he murmured. "If they have maimed him, I swear I will tuck him under my arm and cut my way out though there be a wall of the brutes around him."

His musings came to an end, as the man preceding him stopped suddenly where one of the milky panes broken from the cloister window gave a view of the cloister garden. With the cold November sunshine a hum of voices was coming in, now brightened by peals of laughter, again blurred by the thud of falling quoits. Over the Jotun's shoulder, he caught a glimpse of gorgeous nobles and fair-haired women scattered in graceful groups about a sunny old garden, green in the very face of winter, thanks to the protecting shelter of the gray walls.

Only a glimpse, — for even as he looked, Rothgar caught his cloak and pulled him ahead. "Yonder

door is a better place to look through; already it is open, and the shadow inside is thick enough to hide us."

Pricked as he was by a dozen spurs, Sebert offered no resistance. In a moment, they stood just out of reach of the square of light which fell through the open doorway. Framed in carved stone, the quaint old garden with its gravelled paths, its weedless turfs and its background of ivy-hung walls, lay before them like a picture.

In the longest of the oval spaces, a group of maidens and warriors were gathered to watch a wonderful flower-faced woman play at quoits under the instruction of a noble tutor. At every one of her graceful blunders her laughter rang out in fairy music, which was sweetly echoed by her maids; but the men appeared to see nothing but her beauty as she poised herself lightly before them like some shining azure bird on tiptoe for flight. Sebert paid her the tribute of a quickly drawn breath, even as he took his eyes from her to scan the butterfly pages who ran to and fro, recovering the gilded rings. Yellow hair and red hair and brown hair curled on their gaudy shoulders, but no black. In all the picture there was but one figure crowned with such raven locks as had distinguished Fridtjof the Bold, and that figure belonged to a girl standing directly opposite by the mossy curb of the old well, which, guarded by a circle of carefully tended trees, rose like an altar in the centre of the inclosure. Four of the red-cloaked Danish nobles stood about her, — and one of them wore a

golden circlet upon the gold of his hair, — but the Etheling's eyes passed them almost unheedinglv to dwell upon the black-tressed maiden.

Something about her, while it was entirely strange, was yet so absurdly familiar. She was some very high-born lady, there could be no doubt of that, for the delicate fabric of her trailing kirtle was flowered with gold, and gold and coral were twined in the dusky softness of her hair and hung around her neck in a costly chain, which the King was fingering idly as he talked with her. Now she looked up to answer the jesting words, and the man in the passage saw her smile and shake back her clustering curls with a gesture so familiar . . . so familiar . . .

Rothgar's gloating eyes detected light breaking in his victim's face, incredulity, amazement, consternation; and he began to jeer under his breath. "A great joy is this that you see your Fridtjof again! Why do you not go in boldly and rescue him? Does he not look to be in need of your help?" To stifle his laughter, he muffled his head in his cloak and leaned, shaking, against the wall.

Flushing a deeper and deeper red, the Lord of Ivarsdale stared at the smiling maiden. Just so, a hundred times, she had lifted her sparkling face toward him, and he — fool that he was! — where had been his eyes? Perhaps it is not strange that after the surprise had faded from his look, the first feeling to show was bitterest mortification. Turning, he forced a laugh between his teeth.

"I do not deny you the right to be amused. You speak truly that she needs no help from me. I will hinder you no longer."

Rothgar leaped forward to bar the passage, and the mantle that fell from his face showed no laughter of mouth or eyes. "I have not as yet spoken harm, but it is not sure that I do not mean it," he said. "If you take it in this manner to see how you have been tricked, you may suppose how well I like it to remember the lies she fed to me, who would have staked my life upon her truthfulness. It is not allowed me to take revenge on her for her treachery, but I think I need not spare you, as you got the profit of her falseness."

The Etheling's sword was out while the other was still speaking. "By Saint Mary, do you imagine that I am fearful of you? Never in my life was I more thirsty for fighting."

But Rothgar pushed the blade aside with his naked palm. "Not here, where she could come between. Besides, the King wants a thrust at you first. Nor have you yet greeted Randalin, Frode's daughter." His hand, which was itching for a sword, began to tear the fur from his cloak, and his lips curved in a grin that had in it little of mirth. "Certainly you would not rob the maiden of the pleasure of seeing the one she has taken so much trouble for?" he mocked.

On the verge of an angry retort, Sebert paused to regard him, a suspicion darting spark-like through his mind. Did the Jotun's words smack of jealousy? It

was true that it needed not that to explain their bitterness, and yet — What more natural than that the King's foster-brother should love the King's ward? If it was so, it was small wonder the girl had said that he would slay her when he discovered her unfaithfulness. Unfaithfulness! Sebert started. Had she not in that very word acknowledged a bond? Not only did he love her, but she must have returned his affections. The spark of suspicion flared into a flame. That would solve so many riddles. For one, her presence in the Danish camp, — for surely, as a chieftain's daughter, she would have been sent on to the care of the Lady of Northampton! Was it not thoroughly in accordance with her elfish wildness to have chosen man's attire and the roughness of camp-life in order to remain near her lover? Her lover! The young noble's lips curled as he glanced at the warrior beside him, at the coarse face under the unkempt locks, at the huge body in its trappings of stained gaudiness. Involuntarily, he looked again at the group by the well. She was very winsome in her smiling, and the graceful lines of her trailing robes, their delicacy and soft richness, threw about her all the glamour of rank and state. He clenched his hands at the thought of such treasures thrown down for brutal feet to trample on; and his heart grew hot with anger against her, anger and scorn that were almost loathing, that she who looked so fine should be so poor, so — But he did not finish his thought, for on its heels came another, a recollection that stayed his anger and changed his scorn to compunction. However dear Rothgar might

have been to her, he could be dear no longer, or she would never have betrayed his trust and dared his hate to save Ivarsdale Tower — and its master. Sebert winced and put up his hand to shut out the vision as he realized at whose feet her heart lay now, like a pitiful bruised flower.

Meanwhile, the son of Lodbrok had been drawing heavily on his scant stock of patience. Suddenly, he ran out completely. Seizing the Etheling by the shoulders, before he could raise finger in resistance, he thrust him through the open doorway into the garden, a target for every startled glance. After which, he himself stalked grimly on to await him at the city gate.

CHAPTER XXII

HOW THE LORD OF IVARSDALE PAID HIS DEBT

To his friend
A man should be a friend,
And gifts with gifts requite.
HÁVAMÁL.

A MOMENT, it was to Randalin, Frode's daughter, as if the heavens had let fall a star at her feet. Then her wonder changed to exultation, as she realized that it was not chance but because of her bidding that the man she loved stood before her. Only because she had asked it, he had come through pitfalls and death-traps, and now faced, alone, the gathered might of his foes. Glorying in his deed, she stood shining sun-like upon him until the red cloaks of the advancing warriors came between like scarlet clouds.

"Who are you?" "What is your errand?" "How came you here?" she heard them demand. And, after a pause, in disbelieving chorus, "Rothgar Lodbroksson!" "Does that sound likely?" "Where is he, then?" "You are trying to lie out of something —"

"You are an English spy!" "Seize him!" "Bind him!"

The scarlet cloaks drew together into a swaying mass; a dozen blades glittered in the sun. With a gasp, she came out of her trance to catch at the royal mantle.

"Lord King, you promised to give him safety!"

The seriousness which had darkened Canute's face at the intrusion vanished off it as breath-mist off a mirror. "Is it only your Englishman?" he asked, between a laugh and a frown.

She grudged the time the words took. "Yes, yes! Pray be as quick as you can!"

He did not seem bitten by her haste, but he took a step forward, clanging his gold-bound scabbard against the stone well-curbing to make himself heard. "Unhand the Lord of Ivarsdale, my chiefs," he ordered. As they sent him incredulous glances over their shoulders, he further explained his will by a gesture; and they fell away, murmuring, the swords gliding like bright serpents back to their holes. Then he made another sign, this time to the stranger. "We will accept your greeting now, Englishman, even though you have been hindered in the giving of it," he said politely.

Standing there, watching the young noble advance, it seemed to Randalin that there was not room between her heart-beats for her breathing. How soon would he look up and know her? How would his face change when he did? His color now was a match for the warriors' cloaks, and there was none of his usual ease in his manner when at last he bowed before the King. Pres-

ently it occurred to her to suspect that he had already recognized her, — perhaps from the doorway, — and in her rush of relief at the idea of the shock being over, she found even an impulse of playfulness. Borrowing one of Elfgiva's graces, she swept back her rustling draperies in a ceremonious courtesy before him.

Again he bent in his bow of stiff embarrassment; but he did not meet her glance even then, returning his gaze, soldier-like, to the King. Suppose he were going to treat her with the haughtiness she had seen him show Hildelitha or the old monk when they had displeased him! At the mere thought of it, she shrank and dropped her eyes to the coral chain that she was twining between her fingers.

The awkwardness of the pause seemed to afford Canute a kind of mischievous amusement, for all the courtesy in which he veiled it. His voice was almost too cheerful as he addressed the Etheling. "Now as always it can be told about my men that they stretch out their hands to greet strangers," he said, "but I ask you not to judge all Danish hospitality from this reception, Lord of Ivarsdale. Since Frode's daughter has told me who you are, I take it for granted that they were wrong, and that you came here with no worse intention than to obey her invitation."

His glance sharpened a little as he pronounced those last words, and the girl's hands clasped each other more tightly as she perceived the snare in the phrase. If the Etheling should answer unheedingly or obscurely, so that it should not be made quite clear to the King —

But it appeared that the Etheling was equally anxious that Canute should not believe him the lover of Frode's daughter. His reply was distinct to bluntness: "Part of your guess is as wrong as part of it is right, King of the Danes. Certainly I came here with no thought of evil toward you, but neither had I any thought scever of the Lady Randalin, of whose existence I was ignorant. I answered the call of Fridtjof Frodesson, to whom I owe and I pay all the service which lies in my power, — as it is likely you know."

Did his voice soften as he recalled his debt? Randalin ventured to steal a glance at his face, — then her own clouded with puzzlement. No haughtiness was in it, but a kind of impatient pain, and now he winced under the smart and stirred restlessly in his place. The lightness of the King's voice grated on her ear.

"Then I think you must have got surprised, if this is true, which seems impossible."

The Etheling answered almost impatiently, "If your mind feels doubt of it, Lord Canute, you have but to ask your foster-brother, who conducted me hither."

A while longer, Canute's keen eyes weighed him; then their sky was cleared of the last cloud. The best expression of which his brilliant face was capable was on it as he turned and held out his hand to the girl beside him.

"Shall we pledge our friendship anew, Frode's daughter?" was all he said; but she knew from his look that he had taken her under his shield for all time to come; and it was something to know, now when her

world seemed falling about her. For an instant, as she yielded her trembling fingers to his palm, her groping spirit turned and clung to him, craving his sympathy.

It seemed that he divined the appeal, for with the hand that pressed hers he drew her forward a step. "Is it not your wish to speak to the Lord of Ivarsdale yourself and thank him for keeping his troth with Fridtjof?" he said kindly; and without waiting for an answer, moved away and joined a group of those who had been his companions before the interruption.

At last she stood face to face with the man she loved, face to face, and alone. And still he neither spoke to her nor looked at her! So strange and terrible was it all that it gave her resolution to speak and end it. Her Viking blood could not color her cheeks, but her Viking courage found her a whisper in which to offer her plea for the "sun-browned boy-bred wench."

"Lord, it is difficult to know whether or not to expect your friendship, for—for I have heard what your mind feels toward most matters — and you see now what I have done —"

Did he wince again? She paused in astonishment. It could not be that he was surprised, — was it displeasure? Her words came a little more swiftly, a tremor of passionate pleading thrilling through them.

"You need not think that I did it willingly, lord. Very roughly has fortune handled me. The reason I first came into camp-life was that I trusted someone too much, knowing no more of the world than my father's house. And after the bonds were laid on me, it was not

easy to rule matters. The helplessness of a woman is before the eyes of all people — "

His words broke through hers: "No more, I beseech you!" His voice was broken and unsteady as she had never known it. "Who am I that I should blame you? Do not think me so — so despisable! If unknowingly I have done you any wrong when I owe you — " He paused and she guessed that it had swept over him afresh how much he did owe her. Perhaps also how much he had promised to pay?

"There will be no recompense that you can ask at my hands which I shall not be glad to give," he had said; and she had checked him, bidding him wait to see if he would have more than pity. If he should have no more! She dared not look at him but she felt that he opened his lips to speak, then turned away, stifling a groan. It seemed to her that her breath ceased while she waited, and her hands tightened on the coral chain so that suddenly it burst and scattered the beads like rosy symbols of her hopes. If he should have no more!

At last he turned and came a step nearer her, courtly and noble as he had always been. "I owe to you everything I have, even life itself," he said, "and I offer them all in payment of the debt. May I ask the King to give you to me for my wife?"

In its infinite gentleness, his voice was almost tender. For as long as the space between one breath and the next, her spirit leaped up and stretched out its arms to its joy; but she stayed it on the threshold of utterance to look fearfully into his face, whose every shade

was open to her as the day. Looking into his eyes, she knew that it was no more than pity. He guessed that she loved him and he pitied her; but he could not forgive her unmaidenliness, he could not love her.

Slowly and quite easily she felt her heart die in her breast, leaving only the shell, the husk, of what had been Randalin, Frode's daughter. Her first thought was a vague wonder that after it she could breathe and move as if she were still alive. Her next, a piteous desire to escape from him while she had this strength, before the end should really come. Clutching the broken chain, she drew herself up bravely, her words coming in uneven breathfuls.

"I want not that recompense, lord. I want — nothing you have to give. Little shall you think of the debt, — or think that in helping you, I repaid you for your hospitality, your — "

Her voice broke as the memory of that time passed over her like bitter waters, and she was obliged to stand silent before him, steadying her lip with her teeth, until the waters had fallen. She had a faint consciousness that he was speaking to her, but she did not understand what he said, she did not care. Her only wish was for words that should send him away so that she might be free to sink down beside the old well and press her burning face against its smooth coldness and finish dying there.

"It was the King who sent for you, that he might know whether I had spoken the truth concerning my disguise — " she said when at last her voice returned.

"Now, by coming, you have helped me against his anger, — let that settle all debt between us. I thank you much and — and I bid you farewell." Again Elfgiva's schooling came to her mind and she swayed before him in a courtesy. She even bent her lips into a little smile so that he should not be sorry for her and stay to tell her so. She did not know that her cheeks were as white as her kerchief, that her eyes were dark wells of unshed tears. She knew only that at last he was bowing, he was turning, in a moment more he would be gone —

But just short of that point he stopped, and all motion around her appeared to stop, as a noise down the corridor blotted out every sound in the garden, — the noise of a great body of people rousing the echoes with jubilant shouting.

"The King! The King!" could be heard again and again, and after it a burst of deafening cheers that drowned the rest.

Elfgiva dropped the gilded quoits to wring her hands. "Is it the English, my lord?" she implored of Eric of Norway. "Is it the English attacking us? Shall we be killed?"

"Think you that Danes cheer like that when they are expecting death?" the Norseman reassured her with a hearty laugh. "It is good news, — great news since the whole mob has thought it safe to bring it. Hark! Can you hear what it is that they add after the King's name?"

Listening, everyone stood motionless as the babel

came nearer with a swiftness which spoke much for the speed of the shouters. Only Randalin's little red shoe began to tap the earth impatiently. What did it matter what they said?

"Hail to Canute of Denmark!" "Hail to the King of the Danes and —" Again cheers drowned the rest.

The pages, who had sped at the first alarm like a covey of gay birds, came panting back, tumbling over one another in their efforts to impart the news.

"A messenger!" "A messenger from Oxford —" "From Edric —" "Edmund is —" "— Edmund —" "A messenger!" one cancelled another in the wild excitement.

Elfgiva caught the nearest and shook him until his teeth chattered; and in the lull, the swelling shout reached them for the first time unbroken: "Honor to the King! Hail to the King of the Danes and the Angles!"

From the Lord of Ivarsdale came a cry, sharp as though a heart-string had snapped in its utterance, the tie that for generations had bound those of his blood to the house of Cerdic.

"Edmund?"

The mob of soldiers and servants that burst through the doorway answered his question with exultant shouts: "Edmund is dead! Edmund is dead! Long live Canute the King! King of the Danes and the Angles!"

Unbidden, memory raised before Randalin a picture of the English camp-fire in the glade, with the

English King standing in its light and the hooded figure bending from the shadow behind him, its white taloned hand resting on his sleeve. An instant she shivered at it; then again her foot stirred with unendurable restlessness. If he was dead, he was dead, and there was no more to be said. Was the Etheling always going to stand as though he were turned to stone? Would he never —

Ah, at last he was moving! As if the news had only just reached home to him, she saw him draw himself together sharply and stride toward the door; and she watched feverishly to see if anyone would think to stop him. One group he passed — and another — and another — now he was on the threshold. Her pulses leaped as she recognized Rothgar, in the throng pouring into the garden with the messenger, but quieted again when she saw that the two passed shoulder to shoulder without a look, without a thought, for each other. Now he was out of sight.

She let her suspended breath go from her in a long sigh. "It is good that everyone is too excited to notice what I do," she said to herself. And even as she said it she realized that her limbs were shaking under her, that she was sick unto faintness. "I am going to finish dying now, and I welcome it," she murmured. Staggering to a little bench under one of the old oaks, she sank down upon it and leaned her head against the tree trunk and waited.

CHAPTER XXIII

A BLOOD-STAINED CROWN

He is happy
Who in himself possesses
Fame and wit while living;
For bad counsels
Have oft been received
From another's breast.

HÁVAMÁL.

ATA!" That was the pet name which Elfgiva had given to her Danish attendant because it signified "the lively one." "Tata! I have looked everywhere for you!" The pat of light feet, a swish of silken skirts, and Dearwyn had thrown herself upon the bench under the oak tree, her little dimpled face radiant. "What are you doing here in this corner where you can see nothing? How! Are you not overcome with delight? Only think that Elfgiva will be a queen and we shall all go to London!" As the only adequate means of expression, she threw her arms around her friend in a rapturous embrace.

Something in the touch of her soft body, the caress of her satin hands, was indefinably comforting. Randalin's arms closed about her and pressed her close, while the little gentlewoman chided her gayly.

"What is the matter with you that you are so silent as to your tongue, when you must needs be shouting in your heart? You are as bad as the King, who stands looking from one to another and speaks not a word. Does your coldness arise from dignity? Then let me lose all the state I have and be held for a farmer's lass, for I am going to stand up here where I can see everything." Disengaging herself gently, she climbed upon the bench as she chattered. "The messenger had a leather bag around his neck which I think likely contains Edmund's crown and — Ah, Tata, look! look! Thorkel is holding it up!"

As cries of savage rejoicing mingled with the uproar, Randalin found herself dragged up, whether she would or no, until she stood beside her companion, gazing over the heads of the shouting throng.

Yes, it was Edmund's crown. Again, a picture of the English camp-fire rose before her, and she shivered as she recognized the graceful pearled points she had last seen upon the Ironside's stately head. Now Thorkel was setting them above the Danish circlet on Canute's shining locks, while the shouts merged into a roar of acclamation. Like blowing flowers, the women bent before him, and the naked swords of his nobles made a glittering arch above him.

"But why does he look so strange?" Randalin said suddenly.

And Dearwyn laid a finger on her lip. "Hush! At last he is going to speak."

For now it was plain that Canute's attention was given neither to the nobles nor to the fluttering women. He was bending toward the messenger, holding him with his glance. "Tell more news, messenger," he was saying sternly. "Tell about the cause of my royal brother's death."

The messenger seemed to lose what little breath his ride on the shoulders of the crowd had left him. "My errand extends no further," he panted. "It is likely that the Earl will send you more news — I am but the first —" His breath gave out in an inarticulate gasp, and he began to back away.

But the King moved after him. "Stop —" he commanded, — "or it may be that I will cause you to remain quiet for the rest of time. You must know what separated his life from his body. Tell it."

Stammering with terror, the man fell upon his knees. "Dispenser of treasures, how should I know? The babblings of the ignorant durst not be repeated. Many say that the Ironside was worn sick with fighting."

"You lie!" Canute roared down upon him. "You know they say that Edric murdered him."

At that, the poor fool seemed to cast to the winds his last shred of sense. "They do say that the Earl poisoned him," he blubbered. "But none

say that you bade him to do it. No one dares to say that."

"How could they say that?" Randalin cried in amazement, while the King drew back as though the grovelling figure at his feet were a dog that had bitten him.

"I bid him do it?" he repeated. All at once his face was so terrible that the man began to crawl backward, screaming, even before Canute's hand had reached his hilt.

Before the blade could be drawn, Rothgar had stepped in front of his royal foster-brother with a savage sweep of his handless arm. "Do not waste your point on the churl, King," he said in his bull's voice. "If you want to play this game further, deal with me, — for I also believe that you bade the Gainer murder Edmund."

As though paralyzed by his amazement, Canute's arm dropped by his side. "You also believe it?"

Little Dearwyn hid her face on the Danish girl's breast. "Oh, Randalin, would he do such a deed?" she gasped. "The while that he seemed so kind and gentle with us! Would he do such horrid wickedness?"

"No!" Randalin cried passionately. "No!"

But even as she cried it, Thorkel the Tall dared to lean forward and give the royal shoulder a rallying slap. "Amleth himself never played a game better," he said; "but is it worth while to continue at it when no Englishmen are watching?" And his words seemed to open a door against which the others were crowding.

"King Canute, I willingly admit myself the blockhead you called me!" Ulf Jarl hastened to declare in his good-natured roar. "When I saw you take your point away from Edmund's breast, that day, my heart got afraid that you were obliged to do it to save yourself. Even after I heard how you had made a bargain to inherit after each other, I never suspected what kind of a plan was in your mind."

And Eric of Norway smote his thigh with the half resentful laugh of a man who has been told the answer to a riddle which he has given up. "I will confess that your wit surpasses mine in matters of cunning. I did suspect that you might think it unfeasible to kill him before the face of his army, but I had no idea that it would be possible to get the land from him both according to law and without further fighting or loss of men. On a lucky day is the King born who has a mind like this!"

One after another, all the nobles echoed the sentiment; until even the mob of soldiers found courage to voice their minds.

"His wit is made out of Sleipnir's heels!" "Skroppa herself could not be foreknowing about him!" "I am as glad now as I was disappointed when I saw him take his blade off the Ironside—" "When I saw that, I thought I would turn English—" "They will try now to turn Danish." "You speak well, for he will get great fame on account of his wisdom." So they filled the air with marvelling admiration.

Standing in silent listening, Canute's gaze travelled from face to face until it came to the spot where Elfgiva fluttered among her women, holding her exquisite head as if it already wore a crown. An odd gleam flickered over his eyes, and he made a step toward her. "You!" he said. "What do you believe?"

Pealing her silvery laughter, she turned toward him, her eyes peeping at him like bright birds from under the eaves of her hood. "Lord, I believe that I am afraid of you!" she coquetted. "When I bethink me that all the time I have been chiding you for being unambitious for glory, you have had this in your mind! I shall never presume to compass your moods again. Yes. Oh, yes! I shall see daggers in your smile and poison in your lightest word." Laughing, she stooped and kissed his hand with the first semblance of respect which she had ever shown him.

In the Danish girl's embrace, Dearwyn shivered and nestled closer. "Randalin, you hear her? She thinks he did it."

"She is a foolish woman," Randalin said impatiently, "and if she do not take care, she will feel it for speaking so. See how his fingers tap his belt for all that his face is so still."

His face was curiously still as he regarded the beautiful Elfgiva, — and stilly curious, as though he were examining some familiar object in a new light. "You believe then that I had him murdered?" he asked. "And you find pleasure in believing it?"

"Now it is not murder!" she protested. "When a king kills — in war —"

"But this is not war," he said slowly. Lifting one of the jewelled braids from her shoulder, he played with it as he studied her. "This is not war, for I had reconciled myself to him. I had plighted faith with Edmund Ethelredsson and vowed to avenge his death like a brother."

Her white forehead drew itself into a puzzled frown. "But you were not so foolish as to swear it on the holy ring were you?" When he did not answer, she raised her shoulders lightly. "What should I know about such matters? Have you not told me, many times and oft, that it behooves a woman to shun meddling with great affairs?"

He gave a short laugh, "And when were you ever before content to follow that advice?" Letting the braid slip from his fingers, he stood looking her up and down, his lips curling with scorn. "Yet this was not needful to show me that the elves felt they had done their full day's work when they had made you a body," he said. And whether he did not see her bridling displeasure, or whether he saw and no longer cared to appease it, the result was the same.

Randalin spoke abruptly to her companion. "Dearwyn, I can tell you something. Elfgiva will never get the queenship over England."

"What moves you to say that?" the little English girl asked her, startled.

But Randalin's attention had gone back to the King, who had turned where the son of Lodbrok waited regarding him over sternly-folded arms.

"Brother," he was saying gravely, "your opinion is powerful with me, so I will openly tell you that you are wrong in your belief. I was satisfied with the crown of an under-king, satisfied to pass the time as I had been doing. Never have I so much as hinted to yonder peace-nithing a word of harm against Edmund Ironside."

From Thorkel the Tall came one of his rare laughs, — a sound like the grating of a rusty hinge, — and Rothgar unfolded his arms to fling them out in angry rejection.

"This is useful to learn!" he sneered. "Do you think I could not guess that you had no need to put your desire into words after you had shown Edric by your actions that your mind and his are one, after you had admitted by your bond with him that you hold the same curious belief about honor?"

This time it was Randalin who clutched the English girl. "Oh!" she gasped.

For Canute's eyes were less like eyes than holes through which light was pouring, while his fingers opened and shut as though he had forgotten his sword and would leap upon the scoffer with bare hands.

Thorkel left off laughing to grasp the Jotun's arm and try to drag him backwards. "Do you want to drive it from his mind that he has loved you? Go hide yourself in Fenrir's mouth!"

But the King did not spring upon his foster-brother. Even as they looked, the fire went out in his eyes, spark by spark, until they were lustreless as ashes, and at last he put up his hand and wiped great drops from his forehead. "Never had you the keenness to father that judgment," he said in a strangely dull voice. "It must be that a god spoke through your mouth." Leaving them, he moved forward to the well and stood gazing into it, his fingers mechanically raking together and crushing the dead leaves that had fluttered down upon the curbing.

Dearwyn's pretty lips began to quiver with approaching tears. "Randalin, I am miserably terrified. The air feels as though awful things were about to happen."

"It seems that the world has begun to fall to pieces everywhere," Randalin said wearily. The momentary forgetfulness which the happenings around her had created was beginning to give way before the weight in her breast. She drew herself up listlessly. "Is it of any use to remain up here, Dearwyn?"

But Dearwyn's grasp had tightened. "See! the King is beginning to speak."

Whom he was addressing was not quite clear even though he had turned back to the group of nobles, for his eyes still gazed into space, but his words sounded distinctly: "Heavy is it to lose faith in others, but heavier still to lose faith in one's self. . . . I know that no word of mine urged Edric to this deed, but what my eyes may have said, or some trick of my voice or my

face, is not so sure. . . . It may be that I wanted this thing to happen without knowing it. When I see what it has brought me, I cannot understand how I could help wanting it. . . . It is true that I do not always know for certain what I have at heart." His eyes came back from space to rest musingly on Elfgiva. "When I began this feasting-time, I thought I had grasped heaven with my hands, but now—" he spread out his fingers and released the little bunch of dead leaves that he had been rolling against his palm—"now I let not this go from me more easily. . . . You see that a man is not sure even of his own mind."

Again his head was sinking on his breast, when he raised it with a fierceness that startled them. "One thing only I am sure of, and that is that I have done forever with craft. Hereafter, if a man is a hindrance to me, Rothgar's axe shall send him to Hel while it is broad daylight and all his friends are looking. Such is my luck with craft as though I had grasped a viper by the tail, in the belief that I had seized its snout. . . . I have been finely treated. . . . Not only have I been betrayed by all of you who have thought such thoughts of me, but now some troll has got into me and turned me false to myself so that I cannot give you punishment for your treason! Certainly the gods must think this crown of great value since, before they give it to me, they take from me all that I have thought my happiness, and rob me of my honor as well!"

He dashed his fist against the tree beside him and did not seem to feel it when his hand was bleeding.

"Here I take oath that they shall cause their gift to prove its value! It shall be meat and drink to me, and honor and life itself. Many happenings shall spring from this gift, for I will put my whole strength into the holding of it; Odin himself shall not wrest it from me! I will be such a king that there will not be many to equal me; such a king that they will wish they had given me happiness and left me a man."

Whirling, he flung out his bleeding hand toward Elfgiva, and his mouth was distorted with its bitterness. "Hear that, you who were so mad to have your lord the King of England that you could not spend a thought on the love of Canute of Denmark! You have got your wish, — go back now to your Northamptonshire castle and think whether or not you are gladdened by it."

"Go back!" Elfgiva fell from her height of injured dignity with a piercing scream. "What is it you say, King? Now by the splendor of heaven, you depart not for London without me! Be it known to you that I am going to be your Queen."

At first he looked at her in genuine astonishment; after that he laughed, neither angrily nor bitterly, but with the quietness of utter contempt. "I will have the London goldsmiths send you a crown if you wish," he said. "That is all you understand about being a queen."

She tried to protest, to cajole, to threaten. She tried to do so many things at once that she accomplished none of them. Her speech became less and less intelligible until tears and hysterical laughter reduced it

to mere mouthings, while her tiny hands beat the air with fingers bent hook-like.

But the young King did not look at her again. He had rejoined his nobles and was leading them toward the door, giving rapid orders as he walked. "Do you, Rothgar, see to it that the horses are saddled. Kinsman Ulf, it is my will that you join us some while later, when you have seen these women returned in safety. You, my chiefs, get you ready to ride to Oxford as quick as is possible." His voice was lost in the trampling as they stepped from the turf upon the flagging of the gallery.

When the echoing tread was gone at last from the cloister, the garden seemed strangely silent in spite of the hurrying servants, — silent and empty. In the stillness, it came slowly to Randalin that life was not so simple as she had supposed; that she was not going to die of her grief but to live with it, — live with this dead emptiness in her breast. The years seemed to stretch before her like the snow wastes of the North, — white, white, white, without a break of living green.

CHAPTER XXIV

ON THE ROAD TO LONDON

Hotter than fire
Love for five days burns
Between false friends;
But is quenched
When the sixth day comes,
And friendship is all impaired.

HÁVAMÁL.

ROM Edgeware, where the Watling Street left the Middlesex Forest to cross the barren heath known as Tyburn Lane, the great road was crowded with travellers. A small portion of them — messengers, soldiers, and hunting-parties — were riding northward, but the great mass was facing the City whither they were pressing to warm themselves in the glow of the Coronation. On foot, on horseback, in wagons and on crutches, they were as motley a throng as had ever trod the Roman stones; and the respectable element among them was by no means large enough to leaven the lump. Sometimes a group of merchants was to be seen,

conducting loaded wagons; sometimes, a thane's pompous thane, ensheathed in his retinue; while occasionally, as they neared the New Gate, the crowd was swelled by squads of the lesser Cheapside dealers making the daily pilgrimage from their country dwellings to their stalls in the City. But these were as scattered islands in the stream of half drunken seamen, masterless thralls, wolf-eyed beggars, paupers, vagabonds and criminals, who were pushing toward London in hopes of pleasure or gain or for want of another goal.

Amid such a rabble, and as out of place as a swarm of butterflies in frost-silvered air, a band of high-born women was to be seen approaching the City this early December morning. Gorgeously attired pages, hardly more warlike than the women, made a blooming hedge around them, while a sufficiently strong guard of men-at-arms protected them from actual harm, but from impudent comment and ribald jest there was no defence. Their hoods were pulled down as before a storm, their mantles drawn up above their chins; and all but two of them appeared to be trying to shrink into their gilded saddles.

The two who rode at their head, however, looked to be of a different mettle. Indeed, in the quality of her courage, each appeared to differ from the other, though muffling folds blotted out anything like individuality. The shorter of the two, while she rode with gracefully drooping head, had left her face practically uncovered, seemingly unconscious of the half slighting, half pitying admiration elicited by its pathetic beauty.

The other, who showed no more than the tip of her nose, held her head bravely erect, while, even through her wrappings, the straightness of her back breathed haughtiness.

Yet it was not to the pensive fair one that a timid companion appealed for comfort, when a temporary damming of the stream pressed those who led, back upon those who followed. She stretched out an entreating hand toward the girl with the haughtily carried head.

"Randalin! What will he do — the King — when he finds that we have fooled Ulf Jarl, and come hither against his command?"

The Danish girl laughed recklessly. "Little do I care, Candida, to tell it truthfully. Nothing can be worse than sitting in that Abbey. Here at least there is a chance that something may happen to help us to forget that we are alive."

Candida shook the cloak she had grasped. "But you expect that he will be angry! You told Elfgiva not to undertake the journey because of it. And you were able to say the soothest about his temper."

"I was obliged to tell her that to be honest," Randalin answered, and again there was a little wildness in her laugh, "but I should have gone stone-mad if she had not come." Yet, as her horse commenced to bear her forward once more, she consented to speak more encouragingly across the widening space. "If his humor is right, it may be that nothing disagreeable will happen. She is very fair to look at, — it may be that his

mind will change at the sight of her. Think that you will sleep in the Palace to-night."

Catching this last phrase, as her Valkyria came abreast of her, Elfgiva spoke pettishly: "You see fit to sing a different tune from what you did when you tried to hinder me from this undertaking. I should have brighter hopes if I had not given ear to your advice to send a messenger ahead. If I could have come upon him before he had time to work himself into a hostile temper —"

Her attention wandered as a couple of tipsy soldiers elbowed themselves between the guards only to catch a nearer glimpse of her face, after which they allowed themselves to be thrust back, shouting drunken toasts to her beauty.

"Is it your wish that I help you to lower your hood, lady?" the Danish girl made offer.

Elfgiva's half smile deepened into a laugh. "Not so, not so!" she said. "What! Have you seen so much of war and battle axes that you have forgotten the ways that are pleasing to men? Yet methinks you must needs have taken notice that, always before he goes into battle, a soldier tests the sharpness of his weapon. It is to that end that I endure the gaze of these serfs, — to test the power of my face."

"It would not be unadvisable for you to whet your wits as well," Frode's daughter muttered scornfully, — and somewhat rashly, since Elfgiva's wits had been sharp enough to guess the significance of her handmaiden's interview with the young English noble, and

the knowledge had given her a weapon which she was skilful in using.

"Has the sharpness of your mind brought you so much success then, my sweet?" she inquired with her faultless smile; and had the satisfaction of seeing her rebel shrink into silence like a child before a rod.

The crowding of the highway became more noticeable as they neared the point where the Watling Street swerved from its old course, toward the ford and the little Isle of Thorns, to bend eastward toward the New Gate. Some obstruction at the forking of the roads impeded their progress almost to a walk. After a brief experience of it, Elfgiva spoke impatiently to the nearest soldier.

"Why does it become more crowded when two paths open before us? Why does it not happen that some of these cattle turn down the old way?"

The man shook his head. "I do not think there is much likelihood of that, lady; since the Bridge was built, no one has wanted to use the ford; and there is little else to take that way for, unless you are going to service in the West Minster or to the Monastery."

"Wanted!" the Lady of Northampton repeated in the extremity of scorn. "Bid them turn into that road at once. They stand some chance of their faces getting clean if they take the ford, — if they also get drowned matters very little. Tell them, seek what they may seek, to take that way instantly, or the King shall punish them for interfering with their betters."

The man pushed up his leather cap to scratch his head. He was not unacquainted with her custom of sweeping the Northamptonshire serfs off any road she wished to possess, but that struck him as being somewhat easier than dispersing a Coronation mob at the gates of London; and yet to defy her — that was harder than either of them! It was an interposition of his good angel that at this moment provided a diversion.

Randalin broke from her silence with an exclamation: "Thorkel! Yonder!"

Less than fifty paces ahead of them, the grizzled head of the King's foster-father rose steeple-like above the crowd, while the mighty shoulders of the King's foster-brother made a bulwark beside it, and the gilded helms of the King's guard formed a palisade around them. The obstacle in the way was nothing less than a royal detachment drawn up in waiting beside the road.

Elfgiva's frown relaxed; for the first time in many days she let the liquid music of her laughter trickle forth. "Be blithesome in your minds, maidens!" she called gayly over her shoulder. "Friends are at hand to take charge of us."

Taking into consideration what they had expected, the attention was so flattering that at first they scarcely dared believe it; but its truth was proved the moment Thorkel turned his head and saw them coming. At his command, the line of gilded helms quickly drew out across the road in a barrier which once more dammed the human stream to overflowing. A break in the middle

allowed the party from Gloucester to filter through; then the opening closed behind them; the line bent at either end, and they moved as between walls, guarded against any further jostling or rude contact. Elfgiva sparkled with delight and greeted the Tall One with more affability than she had ever before deigned his gruffness.

"Since my royal lord came not himself to meet us," she said graciously, — and pushing her hood entirely back so that he might get the full benefit of her face, — "he has well honored us in his messengers, than whom no persons could be more welcome. I pray you, tell me without delay how it stands with his health and his fortunes."

Turning from a muttered word to the soldier at his side, Thorkel answered her with his usual curtness. "He thrives well, but his time is full of great matters. To-day he is with the English Witan. Yesterday they chose him to be their king. To-morrow he is to be crowned."

"To-morrow? And he would have let me remain in ignorance!" The Lady of Northampton was unable to repress a start of anger, though she turned it as soon as possible into a plaintive sigh. "Let me be thankful that my arrival is not too late. I cannot tell you how we have been beset with hardships!" Whereupon, she instantly began telling him, giving free rein to eyes and lips and all the graceful tricks of her hands. It did not disturb her in the least that he rode beside her in silence, when she had observed that from under

the bristling thatch of his brows his gaze never left her face.

So complete was her preoccupation that she disregarded another thing, — the highway along which they were travelling. It was Randalin who first awoke to a consciousness that the noise of the rabble had become very faint behind them, that no sounds at all broke the stillness ahead of them, that the uneven weed-grown path they were treading was very different from the smooth hardness of the Watling Street. Fens on either side of them, a low hill to the front — was this the way to London? For the first time, she spoke to the son of Lodbrok, who had silently taken his place at her side.

"This is not the Watling Street! Yet we have not turned — Where are we?"

Rothgar gnawed at his heavy moustache as though the answer were difficult to frame; and before he had time to evolve it, Elfgiva, who had caught the exclamation, had broken off her prattle.

"That is true! The crowd has disappeared — the stones are overlaid with weeds —" In her bewilderment, she reined in her horse and would have stopped to look about her, if Thorkel's hand upon her bridle had not compelled her to remain in motion.

"You are still on the Watling Street," he said harshly. "It is only that this is the old bed of it that has not been used much since the Bridge was built. Besides the ford, it leads also to Saint Peter's Monastery on Thorney —"

Stung with fear, she tried to snatch the lines from him. "I am not going to a monastery! I am going to the Palace."

As a cliff stands against the fretting of waves, his grasp stood against hers; and his voice was as immovable as his hand. "Certainly you are going to a palace, — you did not let me carry out my meaning. Adjoining the Monastery there is a dwelling-place which was once a house for travellers, that King Edgar himself has slept in —"

"It is a prison you are taking me to!" Her voice rose in a shriek. "It is a prison! You are mocking me — I will scream for help!"

His smile mocked her openly then. "By all means," — he assented, — "and see how much it will profit you."

She realized then that walls were for shutting people in as well as for shutting people out, and she could have screamed for very temper. Yet she made one more attempt before giving way. Abandoning her struggle for the lines, she let her little gloved hands alight like fluttering birds upon his mailed arm, and summoned all the eloquence of her beauty into her heavenly eyes.

"No, sooner would I trust to you," she murmured. "You could not mistreat me so! I beseech it of you, take me to the Palace where the King is."

On what she based her belief that he was incapable of thwarting her is not quite clear, for he had never taken the trouble to hide the fact that he considered her a nuisance, and her civil marriage with the King

a piece of youthful folly on Canute's part. Sinister satisfaction was in his tone when he answered her.

"The Palace where the King is," he said, "is the Palace for a Queen."

At first, it seemed that she would either scratch out his eyes or throw herself from her saddle. But in the end she did neither, for a sense of her helplessness turned her faint. To one who has always ruled undisputed, there is something benumbing in the first collision with the pitiless hand of Force. "If I had the good luck to see a bee caught in a brier, I should wish your death," she threatened. But she said it under her breath; and after that, rode with drooping head and eyes that saw nothing of the scene before her.

When the road had left the fens, it climbed a low hill, beyond which it entered a wood. A brook was the further boundary of the wood, and across its brawling brown water a rude stone bridge continued their path, and linked the bank with the little Isle of Thorns. Nature must have had a prison in mind when she constructed this island, Elfgiva thought with a shiver. A low sandy hillock rising amid three streams of water, the high tide would have cut it off completely but for the friendly arm which the Watling Street extended to it from the Tot Hill, while a thicket of brambles and briers edged it like a natural prison wall. Nor had man forgotten such defences, she found when they had passed a gap in the thorny hedge; a fence of stone rose sheer before them and extended on either hand as far as eye could reach. In the fence was a great gate of

black oak, which a black-robed Benedictine presently opened to their summons.

Now for the first time, Thorkel took his hand from her rein. "I will go no farther," he said. "You are expected, and one of the monks will be your guide. It lies only across the court and through one more door." His lips curled in their cruel smile as he motioned her forward. "Go in and take possession. It is not sure how soon the King will get time to come to you. His mood has not been very playful lately. Rothgar's sword has scarcely had time to go to bed in its sheath —"

"The King is occupied with great matters," Rothgar's heavy voice bore down the old man's thinner tones. "It is not only that he has to be crowned and make laws. He has many Englishmen to dispose of, and much land to divide up among his following."

While Elfgiva's glance passed him uncomprehendingly, Randalin lifted startled eyes. When she saw that he was looking directly at her, she knew that it was no chance shaft, but an arrow aimed at her heart. The time had come that he had looked forward to, when Canute should get the kingship over the English, and Ivarsdale should come back to the race that had built it. And it was all fair, quite fair, quite within the rules of the game at which she herself had played. She had not a word to offer as she lowered her eyes and let her horse follow the others as it would. There was satisfaction on the lips of each of the King's deputies as they rode cityward that day.

CHAPTER XXV

THE KING'S WIFE

Long is and indirect the way
To a bad friend's,
Though by the road he dwell.

HÁVAMÁL.

THE fact that King Edgar had slept under its uneven roof, on some visit to Dunstan's monkish colony, was scarcely sufficient to make a palace of the rambling rookery which a wall separated from the West Minster. It was an irregular one-storied building, — or, rather, group of buildings connected by covered passages, — and every kind of material had been used in its construction, — brick and stone and wood, — while some of the smaller offices were even straw-thatched and wattled.

"It is the waste-place of ruins," Elfgiva said on the day of their arrival, when the monk who guided them proudly identified the brick portions as fragments of the old Roman Temple to Apollo, the wooden door-posts as beams from the Saxon Seberht's refectory,

and the stone walls as contributions from Dunstan's chapel, which the Danes of the year one thousand and twelve had reduced to a crumbling pile.

To-day, a fortnight later, Randalin repeated the comment with a despondent addition: "It is the waste-place of ruins, and ruins have come to dwell in it. I can believe that it is no lie about the Fates to call them women, when they put like with like in so housewifely a manner."

She was alone in one of the bare mouldering rooms, leaning against the deep-set small-paned window which had become her accustomed post. It offered no pleasanter outlook than the snow-powdered thicket beyond the wall and a glimpse of the Thames, spreading silently over the surrounding marshes; but from it her fancy's eye could follow the mighty stream around its eastern bend to the point where the City walls began, and Saint Paul's shingled steeple reared itself in lofty pride. The Palace stood in the shade of that steeple, — the real Palace, where the King sat deciding over the fate of his new subjects, taking their lands from them, when he did not take their lives, and banishing them across the sea to live and die in beggary. Her fingers tapped the glass in desperation as she realized her helplessness even to get news of his judgments.

"The King will never come to this rubbish heap," she told herself despairingly. "Here we are buried no less than if we lay in a mound. It is not likely that we shall get news by an easier way than by going to him."

Straining her eyes out over the mist-robed river, she tried for the thousandth time to think of some bait alluring enough to tempt Elfgiva to that point of daring. Hope the Lady of Northampton had every morning when she awoke and looked in her mirror, and Wrath lay down with her every night, but the rashness which had prompted her first attempt, Thorkel must have taken away with him, a trophy tied to his saddle-bow. She made big plans and she talked big words, — but always she put off their fulfilment until the morrow.

"At this gait, he could be dead and in his grave without my knowing it!" Randalin cried in despair, and her voice made it quite clear that "he" no longer meant the King. Since there was no one to see it, she even allowed her head to fall forward on her arms, and let the ache in her throat ease itself in a little sob. "Now it is open to me that I was foolish to let what happened in the garden, that day, cause so much sadness in my heart," she sighed. "It should have been a great joy to me that he was still safe and happy . . . and I should have found some hope in it, also, for as long as he is in England there would always be the chance that I might see him again. . . . And perhaps, after a long while, when he had quite forgotten how I looked as Fridtjof, . . . if I should be able to learn many graceful woman's ways from Elfgiva, . . . and if he should come upon me when I had on a very beautiful kirtle, . . . so long as he likes my hair . . ."

But even as the smile budded on her lips, she plucked it from them, trembling. "How dare I think

of such things, when already they may have driven him across the sea! It would be quite enough if I could know that the same land is to hold us both, if I could have the hope of seeing him again to make it seem worth while for me to go on living. Oh, I did not dream how much I leaned on that, until it was taken from me!" In the utter loneliness of her despair, she crushed her face against her arm, pressing back the burning tears, and her heart rose in a prayer to the Englishman's God, since her own no longer answered her: "Oh, Thou God, if Thou art kind and helpful as he says, it is easy for Thee to let him remain here where I can sometimes see him! Leave me this one hope, and I also will believe in Thee." With her face hidden, she stood there praying it until it rang so strong through her soul that it seemed to her the Power could not but hear. And after He had heard, it would be so simple, — if He was as helpful as Sebert said.

There was new resolution in her movements when at last she left the window and went toward Elfgiva's bower. "I will try once more to entice her to the Palace, so that I can get tidings," she determined. "Perhaps it will be easier if at first I suggest no more than a ride, and after that allure her by degrees. I wonder what kind of humor she is in."

It was not necessary to go far to obtain a hint as to that. Even as she entered the passage, she heard from the bower-chamber the crash of a chair overturned, the scramble of scurrying feet, and then screams and the thud of blows.

"Now it is heard that she is not sulking among her cushions," Randalin observed. "When her temper is up she is little afraid of doing things which she else would not dare do."

According to that her expectations should have mounted high, as she drew aside the door curtain, for the Lady of Northampton was far from sulking. Partially disrobed, as she had sprung up from before her mirror, she was holding the luckless Dearwyn with one hand while with the other she administered pitiless punishment from a long club-like candle which she had snatched from its holder. Between her entreaties for mercy, the little maid was shrieking with pain; now, at sight of Randalin, she redoubled her struggles so that the belt by which her mistress grasped her burst and left her free to dart forward and fling herself behind the Danish girl.

"Help me, help me!" she gasped; as Elfgiva swooped upon both of them, her streaming hair taking on a resemblance to bristling fur, her eyes showing more of opal's fire than of heaven's blue.

"Come not betwixt, or I will treat you in a like manner," the mistress panted. "Do you understand the evil she has wrought? She has broken the wing off my gold fly, besides tearing the hair half out of my head. It is not to be borne with!"

But the Valkyria's fear of Elfgiva's tongue did not extend to Elfgiva's hands. Catching the dimpled wrists, she held them off with perfect coolness, as she said soothingly, "Now you tire yourself much, lady;

and you will tire yourself more if you consent to the entertainment I came hither to propose." She laughed, a little excitedly, as a thought struck her. "It may even be that you will not blame her for this, but rather take it as a sign that my advice is good."

To say "sign" to Elfgiva was something like saying "cream" to a cat. Gradually she ceased trying to free her hands, to gaze at her captor. "What do you mean by that? Or have you any meaning except only trying for an excuse to get this hussy off from punishment?"

"No, in truth, for I thought of it before I knew that trouble had happened to her," Randalin answered; and now she knew that it was safe to release the wrists. "I will show you. I was thinking how it might cause amusement to us to ride into the City and see what the goldsmiths have in their booths. And then I came in here and found you in need of goldsmiths' mending! Does not that look like a sign that my thought is good?"

Elfgiva threw aside the candle to come close and lay her hands upon the girl's breast. "Good for what?" she demanded. "Do you think it likely that I might fall in with the King somewhere in the City?"

This was going a bit faster than Randalin had planned, and her breath came quickly, but she took the risk and admitted it. "I did hope that it might happen that we would see the King," she said, "and — what is more important to us — that the King might see you."

Slowly, the King's wife went back to her seat before the mirror, and sat there fingering and turning the jewelled rouge-pots in a deep study.

"Deliver me your opinion of this, Teboen?" she said, at last, to the big raw-boned British woman who was her nurse and also the female majordomo of her household.

Teboen was enough mistress of the magic art to give anything like an omen its due weight, — and perhaps she was also human enough to be weary of a fortnight's imprisonment with a porcupine. After becoming deliberation, she replied that she thought rather favorably of the plan, that certainly it could do no harm, since a visit to the booths had never been forbidden to them, while it would be almost as sure to do good if the King could be reminded of how beautiful a woman he was neglecting.

Elfgiva's laughter was like returning sunshine. "How! You say so? Then will we make ready without delay! Leonorine, come hither and finish clothing me, — Dearwyn would shake too much. Lay aside your whimpering, child; the scourging is forgiven you. Tata, I could find it in my mind to scold you for not thinking of this before. You must mouth the order for the horses, though," she added as an afterthought. "I should expect it would be told me that I am a prisoner, whereat I should weep for rage."

Another flash of daring lighted Randalin's eyes, though her mouth remained quiet. "A good way to keep them from thinking you a prisoner, lady, is to act

like a free woman," she said. "I shall tell them that you are going to the Palace to see your husband." Sowing her seed, she left it to take root, and went away to convince the head of the grooms.

As she had foretold, he was too uncertain regarding their position to dare contest their order, little as he liked it. In something less than an hour, the five women, fur-wrapped and flanked by pages and soldiers, were riding across the little stone bridge and up the wooded slope of the Tot Hill. In something more than an hour after that, they were passing under the deep arch of the New Gate into the great City itself.

"Do you purpose to visit the Palace first, noble one?" the leader of the guards inquired with a respectful if uneasy salute.

The seed had rooted so far that Elfgiva did not disclaim the intention; but she hesitated a long time, pulling nervously at the embroidered top of her riding glove. "In what direction lie the goldsmiths?" she asked at last.

"Straight ahead, lady. Nothing very pleasant is at the beginning; neither the shambles which lie across the way, nor the wax chandler's which is opposite; but when you get beyond Saint Martin's to the Commons, you will find—"

The lady's nose wrinkled disdainfully. "Which way lies the Palace?"

"Down the lane on your left, noble one. You can see where the wall of the King's garden makes one side of Paternoster Row. You can reach the Cheapside

along the road also," he added, "if you do not turn in your way until you come where the Churchyard joins the Folk — "

"Turn then to the left."

They obeyed her, but their gay chatter died on their lips. If the road bore none of the repulsiveness of the shambles, it was still little more cheerful than the graveyard. On their right, an ice-stiffened marsh reached to the great City wall, while a remnant of the primeval beech forest lay along their left, leafless, wind-lashed and groaning. Ahead, behind its walls and above its gardens of clustering fruit-trees, rose the towers and gilded spires of the King's Palace.

As they neared the arched gateway, red with the cloaks of the royal guards, it seemed to Randalin that an icy hand had closed about her heart. The blood was ebbing from Elfgiva's face, and it could be seen that she was forced to keep moistening her lips with her tongue. Nearer — now they were in front of the entrance — All at once, the lady thrust a spur into her horse as he was slackening his pace in obedience to her tightened rein.

"To the goldsmiths' first," she ordered. "On our way back — " Her words were lost on the frosty wind.

The master of the first booth in the row of wretched little stalls was humped with steaming breath over a brazier of glowing coals. He leaped to greet such splendid ladies with a profusion of salaams and a mouthful of pretty speeches that brought some of the color back to Elfgiva's cheeks.

"Do not have me in contempt, Tata," she admonished with a laugh of some unsteadiness. "It is not certain that I am going to belie you to the guards, or that I have lost faith in your sign. Let me sharpen my weapon for some space among these precious things, and it may be that I shall go hence panting for the field."

"Ah, gracious lady, you must needs buy my whole stock," the merchant cried with ingratiating smiles, "for I can never endure to sell to another what I have once seen near your face."

Elfgiva laughed beautifully then, and the Danish girl took a fresh grip upon her patience. Certainly the jewelled bugs, the golden snakes, the strands of amber and jet and pearl, seemed to act as tonics upon the Northampton lady. If she had not traded away, at the first two stalls, every ornament in her possession, she would have investigated each booth in the square. She came out in bubbling spirits to the waiting horses and the half-frozen guards.

"This Cheapside is a very fairy garden," she prattled, lingering with her foot in the hand of the kneeling groom. "Everything in beds and rows as they were herbs, — milk down this lane, soap down that, jewels, fabrics —" She turned with a sudden inspiration. "Maidens, would not this be a merry thought? To find out where the fabrics are kept and try some cloth of gold against these pearls?"

As the servile murmur answered, Randalin's brow darkened. Cloth of gold and pearls, — when a wolf

was tearing at her heart! She spoke desperately, "I wish that the way to the fabrics might lie past the King's House, lady."

The King's wife sent her a glance, half resentful, half questioning. "Why do you say that?"

"Because if Canute could see you as you look now, with your cheeks a-flower and that ermine, like snow, upon your hair, there is nothing in the world he could refuse you."

Elfgiva's mouth curved bewitchingly. "You speak as though you had jewels to sell. What fine manners they have, these London merchants! Tell me, Candida, Leonorine, does she speak the truth? On your crosses, has not the cold reddened my nose? Or pinched the bloom off my lips?"

If the murmur that answered lacked any heartiness, their mistress did not perceive it, for every man within earshot swelled it with reassurance, — thinking perhaps of the hot spiced wine in the King's cups.

After a moment of hesitation, she flew up to her saddle like a bird. "Do you all think so?" she laughed. "Certainly I never felt in lustier spirits. I declare that I will try it. Hasten, before the roses wilt in my cheeks. Forward! To the Palace!"

CHAPTER XXVI

IN THE JUDGMENT HALL

> Strong is the bar
> That must be raised
> To admit all.
>
> HÁVAMÁL

HILE he kept a firm hold upon the spear which he had dropped like a gilded bar across the door, the English sentinel repeated for the tenth time his respectful denial: "I will take it upon me to admit you to the gallery, noble lady; but though you were the Queen herself, I dare not let you in to the lower part. There be none but men with the King, and it is not fitting —"

"And is the son of a Saxon serf to decide where it is fitting for me to go?" the Lady of Northampton demanded, facing him in a tempest of angry beauty. "Whatsoever you shall do by my direction, dog, will in all respects be available to your credit. Let me through to my husband, or I can tell you that you will find your wariness terribly misplaced!"

The guard discreetly held his tongue, — but he likewise held his position. Elfgiva's bosom was beginning to heave in hysterical menace when a second soldier, lounging against the wall behind the first, ventured a soothing word.

"For your own safety, noble one, ask it not. The King is listening to a quarrel between an Englishman and a Dane; and by reason of it, there are many in the room whose tempers may —"

Randalin, who alone of all the maidens had remained undauntedly at her mistress' elbow, caught that elbow in a vice-like grip. "Take the gallery, then, lady!" she urged in a piercing whisper. "The gallery, — as quick as you can."

As an angry cat wounds whoever is nearest, Elfgiva scratched her in the same undertone. "Stupid! Do you imagine that the only Englishman who has part in the world is the one you showed yourself a fool for? Do you not understand that if I let them assign me to some dark gallery, Canute will not be able to see me?"

It did not appear that the girl so much as felt the claws. Her eyes had a look of strained listening as they gazed past the sentinel and across the ante-room to the great curtained doorway. "He will succeed better in seeing you through a dim light than through a stone wall," she returned.

Biting her lips, the fair Tyrant of Northampton measured the man through her lashes. He might have been of the same material as his spear for all the sign he showed of yielding. She could not understand such

defiance, and, like mysteries in general, it awed even while it angered her. Affecting to draw herself up in disdain, she really gave back a step. "Perhaps it would be wise to put off our visit until a day that there is a man at the door instead of a blockhead —"

Randalin's arm was an iron barrier behind her. "Now I do not know where you think the power to do that will come from!" she hissed in her ear. "Do you not see that if you go back to your grooms and let them know that you have not got enough honor with the King to gain an entrance, they will never dare do your bidding again? Do you not see that you must do one of two things, or now win, or now lose?"

Apparently Elfgiva saw. After a moment's bridling, she whirled back with an angry flounce of her draperies. "The gallery, then, dog! I shall reach my lord's ear from that, which will be an unlucky thing for you."

Saluting in silence, the guard drew back to let her pass, at the same time signing to a row of men-at-arms standing motionless as pillars against the stone wall of the ante-room. With a rattle and clank they came to life, and the little band of five kirtles, surrounded and led, was marched to a low side-door which gave in upon a short flight of stone steps, white-frosted now with the dampness and their distance from the fire. At the head of the flight, another door gave entrance to a narrow passage that probably reached the length of the hall below, though it seemed to the shivering women to extend the length of the Palace itself. A third door,

ending this corridor, admitted them to the gallery that ran across the upper end of the hall.

As she passed the threshold Elfgiva exclaimed in vexation, for the light of the log fire, whose rudely carved chimney-piece broke the long side-wall, succumbed at the balcony's lower edge to the shadows of the raftered ceiling, and all above was wrapped in soft twilight. "He cannot tell me from a monster," she fumed, letting herself sink into a faded tapestry chair, standing forgotten amid a pile of mouldering cushions.

The three English girls, pressing timidly to her side, answered with indistinct murmurs which she could interpret to suit her pleasure. The Danish girl made her no reply whatever. Half kneeling, half sitting upon the cushions, her head was already bent over the gallery's edge, and the scene below had claimed her eye and ear to the exclusion of all else.

Whatever its shortcomings as a show-case, the balcony was excellently adapted both for spectators and for eavesdroppers, its distance from the floor being little more than twice a man's height, while the fire which doled its light so stingily, lavished a glory of brightness on the spot where the King's massive chair stood beside the chimney-piece. After one petulant glance, even Elfgiva's pique gave way to a curiosity that gradually drew her forward to the very edge of her seat and held her there, the three maids crouching at her feet.

Encircled by a martial throng, so massed and indistinct that they made a background like embroidered

tapestry, three figures were the centre of attention, — the figure of the young King in his raised chair, and the forms of the Dane and the Angle who fronted each other before his footstool. Shielded from the heat by his palm, Canute's face was in the shadow, and the giant shape of the son of Lodbrok was a blot against the flames, but the glare lay strong on Sebert of Ivarsdale, revealing a picture that caused one spectator to catch her breath in a sob. Equally aloof from English thane and Danish noble, the Etheling in the palace of his native king stood a stranger and alone, while his swordless sheath showed him to be also a prisoner. He bore himself proudly, one of his blood could scarcely have done otherwise, but his fine face was white with misery, and despair darkened his eyes as they stared unseeingly before him.

As well as though he had put his thoughts into words, the girl who loved him knew that his mind was back in the peaceful manor between the hills, foreseeing its desecration by barbarian hands, foretasting the ruin of those who looked to him for protection. From the twilight of the balcony, she stretched out her arms to him in a passion of yearning pity, and all of selfishness that had been in her grief faded from it utterly, as her heart sent forth a second prayer.

"Oh, Thou God, forget what I asked for myself! Think only of helping him, of comforting him, and I will love Thee as though Thou hadst done it to me. Help him! Help him!"

Answering a question from the King, Rothgar began to speak, his heavy voice seeming to fill all the space from floor to ceiling: "By all the laws of war, King Canute, the Odal of Ivarsdale should come to me. The first son of Lodbrok took the land before ever this Angle's kin had seen it. He built the tower that stands on it, and the name it bears to this day is the name of his giving. Under Guthrum, a weak-kneed son of his lost it to the English Alfred, and we fell out of our fortunes with the tipping of the scales, and Angles have sat since then in the seat of Lodbrok's sons. But now the scales have risen again. Under Canute, Ivarsdale, with all other English property, comes back to Danish hands. By all the laws of war, my kinsman's inheritance should be my share of the spoil."

Ending roundly, he drew himself up in an attitude of bold assurance. Wherever a group of scarlet cloaks made a bright patch upon the human arras, there was a flutter of approval. Even the braver of the English nobles, who for race-pride alone might have supported Sebert in a valid claim, saw nothing to do now but to draw away, with a silent interchange of shrugs and headshakes, and leave him to his doom.

In the shadow of his hand, Canute nodded slowly. "By all the laws of war," he affirmed, "your kinsman's inheritance should be your share of the spoil."

Again an approving murmur rose from Danish throats; and Rothgar was opening his lips to voice a grateful answer, when a gesture of the royal hand checked him.

"Recollect, however, that just now I am not only a war-chief, but also a law-man. I think it right, therefore, to hear what the Englishman has to say for his side. Sebert Oswaldsson, speak in your defence."

Not even a draft appeared to stir the human tapestry about them. Sebert started like a man awakened from sleep, when he realized that every eye was hanging upon him. Swiftly, his glance passed around the circle, from the averted faces of his countrymen to the foreign master on the throne, then bitterly he bent his head to his fate.

"I have nothing to say. Your justice may most rightly be meted out."

"Nothing to say?" The King's measured voice sounded sharply through the hush. For the first time, he lowered his hand and bent forward where the fire-glow could touch him.

As she caught sight of his face Elfgiva shrank and clutched at her women. "Ah, Saints, I am thankful now that it is dark!" she murmured.

Sebert sustained the look with proud steadiness. "Nothing that would be of use to me," he said; "and I do not choose to pleasure you by setting up a weak plea for you to knock down again. The right which gave Britain to the Saxons has given England to the Danes, and it is not by words that such a right can be disputed. If your messengers had not taken me by surprise —" He paused, with an odd curl to his lips that could hardly be called a smile; but Canute gave him grim command to finish, and he obeyed with rising

color. "If your messengers had not come upon me as I was riding on the Watling Street and brought me here, a prisoner, I would have argued the matter with arrows, and you would needs have battered down the defence of stone walls to convince me."

Mutters of mingled admiration and censure buzzed around; and one English noble, more daring and also more friendly than the others, drew near and spoke a word of friendly warning in Sebert's ear. Through it all, Canute sat motionless, studying the Etheling with his bright colorless eyes.

At last he said unexpectedly, "If you would not obey my summons until my men had dealt with you by force, it cannot be said that you have much respect for my authority. Do you not then acknowledge me as King of the English?"

Rothgar betrayed impatience at this branching aside. Sebert himself showed surprise.

He said hesitatingly, "I — I cannot deny that. You have the same right that Cerdic had over the Britons. Nay, you have more, for you are the formal choice of the Witan. I cannot rightly deny that you are King of the Angles."

"If you acknowledge me to be that," Canute said, "I do not see why you have not an argument for your defence."

While all stared at him, he rose slowly and stood before them, a dazzling figure as the light caught the steel of his ring-mail and turned his polished helm to a fiery dome.

"Sebert Oswaldsson," he said slowly, "I did not feel much love toward you the first time I saw you, and it is hard for me not to hate you now, when I see what you are going to be the cause of. If your case had come before Canute the man, you would have received the answer you expect. But it is your luck that Canute the man is dead, and you stand before Canute the King. Hear then my answer: By all the laws of war, the land belongs to Ivar's son; and had he regained it while war ruled, I had not taken it from him, though the Witan itself commanded me. But instead of regaining it, he lost it." He stretched a forbidding hand toward Rothgar, feeling without seeing his angry impulse. "By what means matters not; battles have turned on a smaller thing, and the loyalty of those we have protected is a lawful weapon to defend ourselves with. The kinsman of Ivar a second time lost his inheritance, and the opportunity passed — forever. For now it is time to remember that this is not war, but peace; and in times of peace it is not allowed to take a man's land from him unless he has broken the law or offended honor, which no one can say this Englishman has done. What concerns war-time is a thing by itself; as ruler over laws and land-rights, I cannot give one man's lands to another, though the one be a man I care little for, and the other is my foster-brother. Go back therefore, unhindered, Lord of Ivarsdale, and live in peace henceforth. I do not think it probable that I shall ever call you to my friendship, but when the time comes that there is need of a brave and honest

man to serve the English people in serving me, I shall send for you. Beware you that you do not neglect the summons of one whom you have acknowledged to be your rightful King! Orvar, I want you to restore to him his weapon and see him on his way in safety. Your life shall answer for any harm that comes to him."

With one hand, he struck down the murmur that was rising; with the other he made an urgent gesture of haste, which Orvar seemed to understand. Even while he was returning to the Lord of Ivarsdale his sword, he seized him by the arm and hurried him down the room, the Etheling walking like a man in a dream.

From the dusk of the rafters, the girl who loved him stretched out her hands to him in tender farewell, but there was no more of anguish in the gesture. Gazing after him, the tears rose slowly to her eyes and rolled slowly down her cheeks, but on her mouth was a little smile whose wondering joy mounted to exaltation.

No need was there for her to hide either tear or smile, for no one of the women about her was so much as conscious of her existence. The murmur below was growing, despite the King's restraining hand; and now, crashing through it in hideous discord, came a burst of jeering laughter from the Jotun. What words he also spoke they could not catch, but they heard the Danish cries sink and die, aghast, and they saw a score of English thanes spring upon him and drag him backwards. Above the noise of their scuffling, the King's voice sounded stern and cold.

"While I act as law-man in my judgment hall, I will hear no disputing of my judgments. Whoso comes to me in my private chamber, as friend to friend, may tell his mind; but now I speak as King, and what I have spoken shall stand."

Struggling with those who would have forced him from the room, Rothgar had no breath to retort with, but the words did not go unsaid because of that. Wherever scarlet cloaks made a bright patch, the human arras swayed and shook violently, and then fell apart into groups of angry men whose voices rose in resentful chorus:

"Such judgment by a Danish King is unexampled!" "King, are we all to expect this treatment?" "This is the third time you have ruled against your own men—" "Sven you punished for the murder of an Englishman—" "Because you forced Gorm to pay his debt to an Englishman, he has lost all the property he owns." "Now, as before, we want to know what this means." "You are *our* chief, whose kingship we have held up with our lives—" "What are these English to you?" "They are the thralls your sword has laid-under, while we are of your own blood—" "It is the strong will of us warriors to know what you mean—" "Yes, tell it plainly!" "We speak as we have a right." Snarling more and more openly, they surged forward, closing around the dais in a fiery mass.

In the cushions of the balcony, Leonorine hid her face with a cry; "They will murder him!" And Elfgiva rose slowly from her chair, her eyes dark with

horror yet unable to tear themselves from the scene below. The mail-clad King no longer looked to her like a man of flesh and blood but like a figure of iron and steel, that the firelight was wrapping in unendurable brightness. His sword was no more brilliantly hard than his face, and his eyes were glittering points. The ring of steel was in his voice as he answered:

"You speak as you have a right, — but you speak as men who have swines' memories. Was it your support or your courage that won me the English crown? It may be that if I had waited until pyre and fire you would have done so, but it happened that before that time the English Witan gave it to me as a gift, in return for my pledge to rule them justly. My meaning in this judgment, and the others you dislike, is that I am going to keep that pledge. You are my men, and as my men you have supported me, and as my men I have rewarded you, — no chief was ever more open-handed with property toward his following, — but if you think that on that account I will endure from you trouble and lawlessness, you would better part from me and get into your boats and go back to my other kingdom. For I tell you now, openly and without deceit, that here henceforth there is to be but one rule for Angle and Dane alike; and I shall be as much their King as yours; and they shall share equally in my justice. You may like it or not, but that is what will take place."

How they liked it was suggested by a bursting roar, and the scuffling of many feet as the English

leaped forward to protect their new King and the Danes whirled to meet them, but the women in the gallery did not wait to see the outcome. In a frenzy of terror, Elfgiva dragged up the kneeling maids and herded them through the door.

"Go, — before they get into the ante-room!" she gasped. "Do you not see that he is no longer human? We should be pleading with iron. Go! Before they tear down the walls!"

CHAPTER XXVII

PIXIE-LED

To a good friend's
The paths lie direct,
Though he be far away.

HÁVAMÁL.

SO Sebert of Ivarsdale went back to his tower unhindered; and the rest of the winter nights, while the winds of the Wolf Month howled about the palisades, he listened undisturbed to his harper; and the rest of the winter days he trod in peace the homely routine of his lordship, — in peace and in absent-eyed silence.

"The old ways are clean fallen out of England, and it becomes a man to consider diligently how he will order his future," he told Hildelitha and the old cniht when they inquired the reason for his abstraction.

Perhaps it was the future that was engrossing his mind, but sometimes it came to him dimly as a strange thing how so small a matter as a slip of a girl in a page's dress could loom so large that there was no corner of manor or tower but recalled some trick of her tossing

curls, some echo of her ringing laughter. The platform whereon they had walked in the moonlight, facing death together, he shunned as he would have shunned a grave; and the postern where they had parted was haunted ground. Did he tramp across the snow-crusted fields, memory clothed them again in nodding grain, and between the golden walls a figure in elfin green flitted like a will o' the wisp. Did he outsit the maids and men around his hearth and watch the dying fire with no other companions than his sleeping dogs, fancy placed a scarlet-cloaked figure on the cushion at his feet and raised at his knee a face of sweetest friendliness, whose flower-blue eyes brightened or gloomed in response to his lightest mood. . . . Once more he heard the harp-notes that told of the wood-nymph's sorrow; . . . once more he heard his laughing denunciation; . . . again there looked back at him the wounded eyes. . . . Whenever this vision rose before him, he stirred in his chair and turned his face from the light.

"May heaven grant that she is not remembering it!" he would murmur. And for a while he would see her as he had left her in the garden, holding herself so bravely erect in her shining robes, her white cheeks mocking at her smiling lips. A great well of pity would spring in his breast, drowning his heart with its pent-up gushing, and the waters would rise, rise, until they had touched his eyes. But always before they brimmed over, another change would come. Slowly, the rigid figure before him would relax into an attitude of idle grace, the white cheeks would regain their color, the

eyes their brightness, and — presto! she stood before him as he had seen her from the passage, a high-born maid among her kind, favored by the King, guarded by her lover. When he reached this point, he always rose with an abruptness that swept his goblet to the floor and awakened the sleeping dogs.

"Fool!" he would spurn himself. "Mad puffed-up fool! Keep in mind that she has her consolers, while you have only your wound. If she could stake her all upon the son of Lodbrok and then give him up at the turn of the wheel, is it in any way likely that she is dead with tears for you? What? It may easily be that she has had a new love for every month that has passed."

As the winter wore on, he grew restless in his solitude, restless and sullen as the waters of the little stream in their prison of ice. He told himself that when the spring came he would feel more settled; but when on one of his morning rides he came upon the first crocus, lifting its golden cup toward the sun, it only gave to his pointless restlessness a poisoned barb. Involuntarily his first thought was, "It would look like a spark of fire in the dusk of her hair." When he realized what he had said, he planted the great forefoot of his horse squarely on the innocent thing and crushed it back into the earth; but it had done its work, for after that he knew that neither the promise of the springtime nor the fullness of the harvest would bring him any pleasure, since his eyes must see them alone.

"The next time they sing the 'Romance of King Offa,' before me, I will not hold back my sympathy," he scorned himself, "for at last I understand how it is possible for an elf to lure a man's reason off its seat and leave him a dreaming dolt."

Like a new lease of life it came to him when the last of the April days brought the long-delayed summons to the King. The old cniht, who considered that a command to military service could be justified only by imminent national destruction, was deeply incensed when he learned that the call was to no more than an officership in the new body of Royal Guards, but the young lord checked him with even a touch of impatience.

"What a throng of many words, my friend Morcard, have you spoken! Did you learn naught from the palisade that gave way because churls paid me their service when and how they would?" he demanded. "Now let me inform you that I have got that lesson by heart, and hereafter no king shall have that trouble about me. At sunrise, I ride back with the messenger." And he maintained this view so firmly that his face was rather stern as he spent the night settling matters of ploughing and planting and pasturage with the indignant old servitor.

But the next morning, after he had set forth and found how every mile lengthening behind him lightened the burden of his depression, a kind of joy rose phœnix-like out of the gray ashes of duty.

"If I had continued there, I should have become feeble in mind," he said. "Now, since I have got out of that tomb that she haunts, it may be that I can follow my art more lustily." And suddenly his sternness melted into a great warmth, toward the strapping soldier riding beside him, toward the pannier-laden venders swinging along in their tireless dog-trot, even toward the beggar that hobbled out of the ditch to waylay him. "To live out in the world, where you are pulled into others' lives whether you will or no, is the best thing to teach people to forget," he said. "Solitude has comfort only for those who have no sorrows, for Solitude is the mother of remembrance."

He got genuine enjoyment out of the hour that he was obliged to sit in the ante-room, waiting to be admitted to the King. On one side of him, a group was discussing a Danish rebellion that seemed to be somewhere in progress; on the other, men were speculating on the chances of a Norman invasion, — news of keenest interest was flying thick as bees in June; and the coming and going of the red-cloaked warriors, the occasional passing of some great noble through the throng, stimulated him like wine.

"Praise to the Saint who has brought me into a life where there are no women!" he told himself. "Yes! Oh, yes! Here once more I shall rule my thoughts like a man." When a page finally came to summon him, he followed with buoyant step and so gallant a bearing that more than one turned to look at him as he passed.

"Yonder goes the new Marshal," he heard one say to another, and gave the words a fleeting wonder.

The bare stone hall into which the boy ushered him was the same room in which he had had his last audience, and now as then the King sat in the great carved chair by the chimney-piece, but other things were so changed that inside the threshold the Etheling checked his swinging stride to gaze incredulously. No soldiers were to be seen but the sentinels that had been placed beside the doorways, stiff as their gilded pikes, and they counted strictly in the class with the ebony footstools and other furnishings. The knots of men, scattered here and there in buzzing discussion, were all dark-robed merchants and white-bearded judges, while around the table under the window a dozen shaven-headed monks were working busily with writing tools. The King himself was no longer armored, but weaponless and clad in velvet. Stopping uncertainly, Sebert took from his head the helmet which he had worn, soldier fashion, into the presence of his chief, and into his salutation crept some of the awe that he had felt for Edmund's kingship, before he knew how weak a man held up the crown.

Certainly Edmund had never received a greeting with more of formal dignity than the young Dane did now, while Edmund could never have spoken what followed with this grim directness which sent every word home like an arrow to its mark.

"Lord of Ivarsdale, before I speak further I think it wise that we should make plain our minds to each

other. Some say that you are apt to be a hard man to deal with because you bend to obedience only when the command is to your liking. I want to know if this is true of you?"

Half in surprise, half in embarrassment, the Etheling colored high, and his words were some time coming; but when at last they reached his lips, they were as frank as Canute's own. "Lord King," he made answer, "that some truth is in what you have heard cannot be gainsaid; for a king's thane I shall never be, to crouch at a frown and caper according to his pleasure. What service I pay to you, I pay as an odal-man to the State for which you stand. Yet I will say this, — that I think men will find me less unruly than formerly, for, as I have accepted you for my chief, so am I willing to render you obedience in any manner soever you think right to demand it. This I am ready to swear to."

Canute's fist struck his chair-arm lightly. "Nothing more to my mind has occurred for a long time, and I welcome it! Better will both of us succeed if we declare openly that friendship between us must always be rather shallow. I love not men of your nature, — neither is it possible for me to forget what you have cost me. Hatred would come much easier to me, — and I will not deny that you will feel it if ever you give me fair cause for anger." For an instant an edge of his Viking savagery made itself felt through his voice; then faded as quickly into cold courtesy. "As to this which I now offer you, however, I think few are proud enough to find fault about it, for I have called

you hither to be a Marshal of the kingdom and to have the rule over my Guards. Men from many lands will be among them, and it is a great necessity that I have at their head a man I can trust, while it is also pleasing to the English that that man be an Englishman. Concerning the laws which I shall make to govern them, Eric Jarl will tell you later."

"Marshal!" That then was what the mutter in the ante-room had meant. Sebert would not have been young and a soldier if he had not felt keen delight tingle through every nerve. Indeed, his pleasure was so great that he dared say little in acknowledgment, lest it betray him into too great cordiality toward this stern young ruler who, though in reality a year younger than he, seemed to have become many years his senior. He said shortly, "If I betray your trust, King Canute, let me have no favor! Is it your intention to have me make ready now against this incursion of the Normans, of which men are —"

He did not finish his question, for the King raised his hand impatiently.

"It is not likely that swords will have any part in that matter, Lord Marshal. There is another task in store for you than to fight Normans, — and it may be that you will think it beneath your rank, for instead of the State, it concerns me and my life, which someone has tried to take. Yet I expect you will see that my death would be little gainful to England." A second curt gesture cut short Sebert's rather embarrassed protest. "Here are no fine words needed. Listen to the

manner in which the deed was committed. Shortly before the end of the winter, it happened that Ulf Jarl saw the cook's scullion pour something into a broth that was intended for me to eat. Suspecting evil, he forced the fellow instead to swallow it, and the result was that, that night, the boy died."

The Etheling exclaimed in horror: "My lord! know you whence he got it?"

"You prove a good guesser to know that it was not his crime," the King said dryly. "A little while ago, I found out that he got it from the British woman who is nurse to Elfgiva of Northampton."

To this, the new Marshal volunteered no answer whatever, but drew his breath in sharply as though he found himself in deep water; and the King spoke on.

"I did not suspect the Lady of Northampton of having evil designs toward me, because — because she is more prosperous in every respect while I am alive; and now that belief is proved true, for I am told for certain that, the day before the British woman gave the boy the liquid, a Danishman gave the British woman an herb to make a drink of." He paused, and his voice became slower and much harder, as though he were curbing his feelings with iron. "Since you have heard the Norman rumor," he said, "it is likely that you have heard also of the discontent among the Danes, who dislike my judgments; but in case you have not, I will tell you that an abundance of them have betaken themselves to a place in the Middlesex forest where they live outlaws, — and their leader is Rothgar Lodbroksson."

To motion back a man who was approaching him with a paper, he turned away for a moment; and Sebert was glad of the excuse to avoid meeting his glance. Not until now had he understood what the judgment in his favor had cost the judge, and his heart was suddenly athrob with many emotions. "In no way is it strange that I am hateful to him," he murmured. "But by Saint Mary, *he* is of the sort that is worth enduring from!" He inclined his head in devoted attention as the King turned back, lowering his tone to exclude all but the man before him.

"Even less than I believe it of Elfgiva of Northampton, do I believe it of Rothgar Lodbroksson, that he would seek my life. But often that happens which one least expects, and it is time that I use forethought for myself. Now I know of no man in the world who is better able to help my case than you."

"I!" the Etheling ejaculated. Suddenly it occurred to him to suspect that his new-sworn vow of obedience was about to be put genuinely to the test, and he drew himself up stiffly, facing the King. But Canute was tracing idle patterns on the carving of his chair-arm.

"Listen, Lord of Ivarsdale," he said quietly. "It is unadvisable for me to stir up further rebellion among the Danes by accusing them of things which it is not certain they have done, and even though I seized upon these women it would not help; while I cannot let the matter continue, since one thing after another, worse and worse, would be caused by it. The only man who

can end it, while keeping quiet, is the one who has the friendship of the only woman among them to whose honor I would risk my life. I mean Randalin, Frode's daughter."

Whether or not he heard Sebert's exclamation, he spoke on as though it had not been uttered. "One thing is, that she knows nothing of a plot; for did she so, she would have warned me had it compelled her to swim the Thames to reach me. But she must be able to tell many tidings that we wish to know, with regard to the use they make of their jewels, and the Danes who visit them, and such matters, which might be got from her without letting her suspect that she is telling news. Now you are the one person who might do this without making any fuss, and it is my will therefore that you go to her as soon as you can. Your excuse shall be that the Abbot has in his keeping some law-parchments which I have the wish to see, but while you are there, I want you to renew your friendship with her and find out these things for me. By obeying me in this, you will give the State help where it is most needed and hard to get." When that was out, he raised his head and met the Etheling's eyes squarely, and it was plain to each of them that the moment had come which must, once and forever, decide their future relations.

It was a long time that the Lord of Ivarsdale stood there, the pride of his rank, and the prejudice of his blood, struggling with his new convictions, his new loyalty. But at last he took his eyes from the King's to bow before him in noble submission.

"This is not the way of fighting that I am used to, King Canute," he said, "and I will not deny that I had rather you had set me any other task; but neither can I deny that, since you find you have need of my wits rather than of my sword, it is with my wits that it behooves me to serve you. Tell me clearly what is your command, and neither haughtiness nor self-will shall hinder me from fulfilling it."

CHAPTER XXVIII

WHEN LOVE MEETS LOVE

> Rejoiced at evil
> Be thou never,
> But let good give thee pleasure.
>
> HÁVAMÁL.

EFORE the time of the Confessor, the West Minster was little more than the Monastery chapel, in which the presence of the parish folk, if not forbidden, was still in no way encouraged. To-day, when the Lord of Ivarsdale came unnoticed into the dim light while the last strains of the vesper service were rising, there were no more than a score of worshippers scattered through the north aisle, — a handful of women, wives of the Abbot's military tenants, a trader bound for the land beyond the ford, a couple of yeomen and a hollow-eyed pilgrim, drifting with the current of his unsteady mind. After a searching glance around him, the Etheling took up his station in the shelter of a pillar.

"Little danger — or hope — is there that I can miss her," he told himself, "if she is indeed here, as

the page said. Yet of all the unlikely places to seek her!" he smiled faintly as the figure in elfin green flitted through his mind. As well look for a wood-nymph at confession — unless indeed, Elfgiva had taken her there against her will — But that was scarcely likely, he remembered immediately afterwards, since an Englishwoman who had entered into a civil marriage with a Dane would be little apt to frequent an English church. "Doubtless she makes of it a meeting place with her newest lover," he concluded. And the anger the thought gave him, and a sense of the helplessness of his own position, was so great that he could not remain quiet under it but was tortured into moving restlessly to and fro in the shadow.

Tender as the gloaming of a summer day was the shade in the great nave, with the ever-burning candles to remind one of the eternal stars. Now their quivering light called into life, for one brief moment, the golden dove that hung above the altar; now it touched with dazzling brightness the precious service on the holy table itself; again it was veiled by drifting incense as by heaven's clouds. From the throats of the hidden choir, the last note swelled rich and full, to roll out over the pillared aisles in a wave of vibrant sound and pass away in a sigh of ineffable sweetness under the rafters.

As he bowed his head in the holy hush that followed, the hush of souls before a wordless benediction, some of Sebert's bitterness gave way to a great compassion. What were we all, when all was

told, but wrong-doers and mourners? Why should one hold anger against another? In pity for himself and the whole world, his heart ached within him, as a rustling of gowns and a shuffling of feet told that the worshippers had risen from their knees and were coming toward him. He raised his bowed head sadly, fearfully.

First came the merchant, tugging at his long beard as he advanced, — though whether his meditations were the leavings of the mood that had held him or a reaching forward into the busy future, none could tell. Him, Sebert's eye dismissed with a listless glance. Behind the trader came the yeomen, one of them yawning and stretching noisily, the other energetically pulling up his belt as one tightens the loosened girth on a horse that has had an interval of rest. The young noble's glance leaped them completely in its haste to reach those who followed, — the knot of women, fluttering and rustling and preening like a flock of birds. But the bird he sought was not of their number. He stared blindly at the pilgrim as the wanderer shuffled past, muttering and beating his breast. Only one figure followed the penitent, and if that should not be she! Even though he felt that it could not be — even though he hoped it was not — hoping and fearing, dreading and longing, his eyes advanced to meet the last of the worshippers.

Only one figure, but all at once it was as though the whole world were before him!

Coming slowly toward him out of the soft twilight,

with eyes downcast and hands folded nun-like before her, the daughter of Frode did not look out of place amid blue wreaths of incense and starry altar tapers. Even her robes were in keeping, gold-weighted as they were, for hood and gown and fur-bordered mantle were of the deepest heliotrope, that color which bears the majesty of sorrow while yet it holds within it the rose-tint of gladness. Beneath its tender shadow the dusk of her hair became deeper, and her face, robbed by winter of its brownness, took on the delicacy of a cameo. Ah, what a face it was now, since pain had deepened its sweetness and patience had purified its ardor! The radiance of a newly-wakened soul was like a halo around it.

Standing there gazing at her, a wonderful change came over the Lord of Ivarsdale. Neither then nor ever after could he understand how it happened, but, all at once, the barrier that circumstances had raised against her fell like the city walls before the trumpet blast, until not one stone was left standing upon another. Without knowing how or why, — looking at her, he believed in her; and his manner, which a moment before had been constrained and hesitating, became easeful with perfect confidence. Without knowing how or why he knew it, he knew that she had never squandered her love on the Jotun, neither had she come here to meet any Dane of the host. He knew her for his dream-love, sweet and true and fine; and he stepped out of the shadow and knelt before her, raising the hem of her cloak to his lips.

"Most gentle lady, will you give a beggar alms?" he said with tender lightness.

The sound of his voice was like a stone cast into still water. The rapt peace of her look was broken into an eddy of conflicting emotions. Amazement was there and a swift joy, which gave way almost before it could be named to something approaching dread, and that in turn yielded place to wide-eyed wonder. With her hands clasped tightly over her breast, she stood looking down at him.

"My lord?" she faltered.

As one who spreads out his store, he held out his palms toward her. "Randalin, I have sought you to add to the payment of my debt the one thing that in my blindness I held back, — I have come to add my true love to the rest I lay before you."

As a flower toward the sun, she seemed to sway toward him, then drew back, her sweet mouth trembling softly. "I — I want not your pity," she said brokenly.

Still kneeling before her, he possessed himself of her hands and drew them down to his lips. "Is it thus, on his knee, that one offers pity?" he said. Holding the hands fast, he rose and stood before her. "Heart beloved of my heart, you were merciless to read the truth before. Look again, and take care that you read me as fairly now."

Despite his gentleness, there was a strength in his exaltation which would not be resisted. Turning shrinkingly, she looked into his eyes.

In the gray-blue depths of her own he saw the shimmer of a dawning light, as when the evening star first breaks through a June sky, and gradually the star-splendor spread over her face, until it touched her parted lips.

"You — love me —" she breathed, but her voice no longer made it a question.

Still gazing into his eyes, she let him draw her closer and closer, till he had gathered her to his breast.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE RING OF THE COILED SNAKE

He is happy
Who for himself obtains
Fame and kind words;
Less sure is that
Which a man must have
In another's breast.

HÁVAMÁL.

THE murmur of the rain that was falling gently on the budding roses of the Abbey garden stole in through the open windows of Elfgiva's bower and blended softly with the music of Candida's lyre. Poring over the dingy scrolls spread out on the table before her, the Lady of Northampton yawned until she was moved to throw herself back among her cushions with a gesture of graceful surrender.

"It seems that the Saints are going to take pity on me and shorten one of these endless days with a nap. Nurse, have a care for these scrolls. And if it happen that the King's Marshal comes — Randalin! Where is Randalin?"

Beyond Leonorine's embroidery frame and the stool where Candida bent over her lyre, the length of the room away, a figure in iris-blue turned from the window by which it stood.

"Here, lady. What is your need?"

To place the speaker Elfgiva raised her head slightly, laughing as she let it sink back. "Watching for him already, and the sun but little past noon? For shame, moppet! Come here."

"So please you, I was watching the rain on the roses," Randalin excused herself with a blush as she came forward.

A merry chorus mocked her: "Is it to watch the roses that you have put on the gown which matches your eyes, you sly one?" . . . "And the lilies in your hair, sweet? Is it to shelter them from the rain that you wear them?" . . . "Fie, Tata! Can you not fib yet without changing color?"

But Elfgiva raised an impatient hand. "Peace, chatterers!" she commanded; and drawing the girl to her, she spoke low and earnestly in her ear.

Randalin looked up in surprise. "You will not see him, lady? Not though he bring news of the doings in the Palace?"

"Heaven's mercy!" Elfgiva shrugged with a touch of scorn. "What abundance of news he has found to bring since the day he fell in with you at even-song!" Then she consented to smile faintly as she settled her head among the cushions. "I would rather sleep, child. Comfort him as best you can, — only not so well that

you forget that which I enjoined you. If he fail us, I cannot tell what we shall do, — now that the second scullion has been so foolish as to get himself killed in some way. Where bear you the ring?"

The girl touched the spot where the gold chain that encircled her neck crept into the breast of her gown. The lady shook her head.

"Never would you think of it again. Take it out and wear it on your finger."

As she obeyed, Randalin laughed a little, for the ring was a man's ring, a massive spiral whose two ends were finished with serpents' heads, and her thickest finger was but a loose fit in its girth. But Elfgiva, when she had seen it on, closed her eyes with an air of satisfaction.

"To keep from losing it, will keep it in your mind," she said. "Now leave me. Candida, — more softly! And see to it that you do not stop the moment my eyes are closing. Leonorine, why are you industrious in singing only when it is not required of you? . . . That is better. . . . Let no one wake me."

They drew silence around her like a curtain through whose silken web the blended voices of rain and lyre and singer crept in soothing melody. To escape its ensnaring folds, Randalin stole back to the distant window beneath which Dearwyn sat on a little bench, weaving clover blossoms into a chain.

The little gentlewoman looked up with her soft pretty smile. "How mysterious you are, you two!" she whispered, as she swept the mass of rosy bloom to

the floor to make room for her friend. "What with Teboen always seething ill-smelling herbs and — Tata, I pray you to tell who has gifted you with such a monster?"

Waving the ring where the light might catch the serpents' eyes, Randalin pursed her lips with so much mystery that her friend was tempted to catch the hand and hold it prisoner while she examined the ornament. After one look, however, she let it fall with an expression of awe upon her dimpled face.

"The ring Canute gave Elfgiva — that he won from the giant Rothgar? Heaven forbid that I should press upon her secrets! My ears tingle yet from the cuff I got only for looking at yonder dirty scroll. Yet how long is it since you were taken into their councils, Tata? Yesterday you were no better able than I to say how things were with her."

"How long?" Randalin repeated dreamily. Her gaze had gone back again to the rain, falling so softly that every pool in the sodden paths seemed to be full of lazily winking eyes. "Oh, there are many good chances that he will be here soon now. He is seldom later than the third hour after noon."

After a bewildered gasp, Dearwyn stifled a burst of laughter in her garlands. "Oh, Tata, come to earth!" she admonished. "Come to earth!" And scooping up a handful of the fragrant bloom, she pelted the dreamer with rosy balls.

Shaking them from robe and clustering hair, Randalin turned back, smiling. But her lips sobered almost

to wistfulness as she sank down upon the seat beside her friend. "It seems that I must do that against my will," she said. "Dearwyn, do you get afraid when you are happy? Sometimes, when I stand here watching for him and think how different all has happened from what I supposed, I am so happy," — she paused, and it was as though the sun had caught the iris flowers in her eyes, until a cloud came between and the blue petals purpled darkly — "so happy that it causes fear to me, lest it be no more than a dream or in some way not true."

Her cheek, as she ended, was softly pale, but Dearwyn brushed it pink with sweeps of the long-stemmed blossom in her hand.

"Sweet, it is the waxing of the moon. I pray you be blithe in your spirits. Small wonder your lover bears himself as gravely as a stone man on a tomb if you talk such — "

"Dearwyn, the same thought has overtaken us both!" Randalin broke in anxiously, and now she was all awake and staying the other's busy fingers to ensure her attention. "Not a few times it has seemed to me that he looks weary of heart, as though some struggle were sapping his strength. He swears it is not so, yet I think the rebellion of his pride against king-serving — "

"If you want to know my belief, it is that he carries trouble in his breast about you," Dearwyn interrupted.

"About me?" So much hurt surprise was in Randalin's manner that the little maid begged forgiveness with caresses of the swaying clover.

"Be not vexed, honey, but in truth he is overcome by the oddest look whensoever he watches you without your seeing, — as though he were not sure of you, in some way, and yet — Oh, I cannot explain it! Only tell me this, — does he not ask you, many times and oft, if you love him, or if others love you, or such like?"

In the midst of shaking her head, Randalin paused and her mouth became as round as her eyes. "Foolishly do I recall it! As if he would! And yet — Dearwyn, he has asked me four times if any Danes visit us here. Would you think that he could be —"

"Jealous?" Dearwyn dropped her flowers to clap her hands softly. "Tata, I have guessed his distemper rightly. Let no one say that I am not a witch for cleverness! Ah, you can have the best fun that ever any maid could have! If you could but make him believe something about that Danishman that Teboen saw last winter!"

"Last winter?" Randalin repeated. "Oh! I had altogether forgotten him. It seems that it has not been truthfully spoken when —"

The little Angle smothered the rest in her rapturous embrace. "The ring, Tata, — that would be the cream of all! Let him think that Rothgar gave it to you, that he is your lover! I would give many kirtles to see his face."

"Rothgar?" Randalin's voice was light with scorn. "As likely would I be to think him love-struck for the serving-wench who sparkled her eyes at him, as he to think that Rothgar Lodbroksson could count for aught

with me! Yet I say nothing against the fun it would be. It may be that if he take notice of the thing and question me — just to see how he would look — " She broke off discreetly, but the one elf which the Abbot had not exorcised crept out and danced in the dimple of her cheek.

Dearwyn shook her floral rod with an assumption of severity. " I trust he will be sorely disquieted," she said. " He deserves no otherwise for his behavior last winter. Are you so soft of heart, Tata, that you are never going to reckon with him for that? "

The dimple-elf took wing and all the mischief in the girl's eyes seemed to go with him. " Those days are buried," she said. " Let the earth grow green above them." And suddenly she leaned forward and hid her face on the other's shoulder. " Bring them not before me, Dearwyn, my friend, until I am a little surer of my happiness. It is so new yet, Dearwyn, so new! And it came to me so suddenly that sometimes it almost seems as if it might depart as suddenly from me." A while they nestled together without speaking, the little maid's cheek resting lovingly on her friend's dark hair.

It was a page thrusting aside the arras that broke the spell. Opening his mouth to make a flourishing announcement, the words were checked on his tongue by four white hands motioning stern commands for silence.

" It is the King's Marshal," he framed with protesting lips. But even that failed to gain him admittance.

Rising, flushed and smiling, the girl with the blue

lilies in her hair tiptoed toward him. "I have orders to receive the Marshal," she whispered. "Where is he?"

"He is in the Old Room," the page answered rather resentfully, but resigned himself as he remembered that, however this curtailed his importance, it left open a prompter return to his game of leap-frog along the passage.

In all probability his nimble departure saved him from a scolding for, as she tripped after him down the corridor, a little frown was forming between Randalin's brows. "I think it is not well-mannered of the fellow to say 'the King's Marshal' as though my lord were Canute's thane," she was reflecting, "and I shall put an end to it. Whatever others say, one never needs to tell me that Sebert is not suffering in his service."

With this thought in her mind, she raised the moth-eaten tapestry and stood looking at him with a face full of generous indignation. Except for the noble's embroidered belt and gold-hilted sword, his dress now differed in no way from that of the hundreds and hundreds of red-cloaked guards who were spread over the country like sparks after a conflagration. As he turned at the end of the beat he was pacing and came slowly toward her, she could see that in its gravity his face was as soldier-like as his clothes. Always she found it so when she came upon him unawares; and always, when she spoke to him — She held her breath as his eyes rose to her, and let it go with a little sigh of happiness as she saw gloom drop from him like a mask at the sight of her.

"Randalin!" he cried joyously, and made a step toward her, then stopped to laugh in gay wonder. "Now no poet would call you 'a weaver of peace' as you stand there, for you look rather like an elf of battle. What is it, my raven?"

Her lips smiled back at him, but a mist was over her eyes. "It is your King that I am angry with, lord. He is not worthy that a man like you should serve him."

Moving toward her again, he held himself a little straighter. "I serve not the King, dear heart," he said gently, "but the State of England, in whose service the highest is none too good to bend."

She yielded him her hands but not her point. "That does not change the fact that it is his overbearingness which makes your path as though you trod on nettles, — for certainly I know it is so, though you will not say it!"

Neither would he admit it now, but laughed lightly as he drew her to him. "Now may he not give me thorns who gives me also the sweetest rose in his kingdom? I tell you he is the kingliest king ever I had to deal with, and the chief I would soonest trust England to. Be no Danish rebel, shield-maiden, or as the King's officer I will mulct your lips for every word of treason."

She showed no rebellion against his authority, at all events; and her hands remained in his clasp until of his own accord he opened his fingers with an exclamation.

"Do you wear bracelets for rings, my fair, or what? *What!*" From the monstrous bauble in his palm, he raised his eyes to hers, and if she had seen their look

she might have answered differently. But her gaze was still on the ring; and as she felt him start, that impish dimple peeped out of her cheek.

"Is it not a handsome thing?" she said. "It looks to be a ring to belong to a giant."

"Is it — Rothgar's?"

The dimple deepened as she heard his tone. For all its absurdity, there must be some truth in Dearwyn's witch-skill. She was obliged to droop her lashes very low to hide the mischief in her eyes. "It is not his now," she murmured. "It has been given me — to keep me in mind of something." But after that her amusement grew too strong to be repressed, and she looked up at him with over-brimming laughter. "There will soon be too much of this! Sweetheart mine, are you in truth so easy to plague?"

Laughing she looked up at him, but, even as his face was clearing, something in it struck her so strangely that her laughter died and she bent toward him in sudden gravity. "Lord! It is not possible for you to believe that I could love Rothgar!" Her manner of uttering that one word made it speak more scorn than volumes might have done.

For a while he only looked at her, that strange radiance growing in his face; but suddenly he caught her to him and kissed her so passionately that he hurt her, and his voice was as passionate as his caress. "No," he told her over and over. "Would I have offered you my love had I believed that? No! No!"

Satisfied, she made no more resistance but clung to him with her arms as she had clung to him with her heart since the first hour he came into her life. Only, when at last he released her, she took the ring from her finger and thrust it into his hand with a little gesture of distaste. "I shall be thankful if I do not have to see it again. It is Elfgiva's, that Canute gave her after he had won it from Rothgar in some wager. It is her wish that you bring it to the King again by slipping it into his broth or his wine where he will come upon it after he has finished feeding and is therefore amiable—" She stopped to laugh merrily in his face. "See how the very naming of the King turns you grave again! When one gets a Marshalship, one becomes more and more stark." Grown mischievous again in her happiness, she mocked him with courtesies.

But it was only very faintly that he smiled at her fooling, as he held the spiral against the light and shook it beside his ear. "Is there no more to the message," he said slowly. "Am I to know nothing of her object? Or why I am chosen of all others?"

"Easy is it to tell that," she laughed. "You were not chosen without a reason, and that is because no one else is to be had, since the scullion who formerly served her has gotten himself killed in some way and the man who stepped into his shoes, out of some spite, has refused Teboen's gold. And as for her object—I wonder at you, lord of my heart! What kind of a lover are you that you cannot guess that?" Feigning to flout him, she drew away; then feigning to relent, turned back

and laughed it into his ear. "It is a love-token! To hold him to the fair promises he made at its giving, and to remind him of her, and to win her a crown, and to do so many strange wonders that no tongue can number them! Are you not ashamed to have failed on so easy a riddle?"

To her surprise, his gravity deepened almost to horror. "Love-token!" he repeated; and suddenly he laid his hands on her shoulders and forced her gently to give him eye for eye. "Randalin, if I comply with you in this matter, will you answer me a question? Answer with such care as though your life — nay, as though *my* life depended on it?"

"Willingly; more than one," she consented; but forgot to wait for it as a memory, wakened by his words, stirred in her. "Now it is time for me to remember that there is one thing I have not been altogether truthful about, through forgetting, — about the Danes we have seen. I recall now that last winter Teboen often saw one when she was gathering herbs in the wood. She spoke with him of the magic things she brews to make Elfgiva sleep, and he gave her herbs which she thought so useful that she has been fretful because she has not seen him since —"

Unconsciously, the young soldier's hands tightened on her shoulders until she winced. "You know with certainty that she has never seen him since?" he demanded, — "that Danes had naught to do with the last token Elfgiva sent through the scullion? You can swear to it?"

"Certainly, if they speak the truth, I know it," she answered wonderingly. "How should Danes — why, Sebert, what ails you?"

For he had let go her shoulders as abruptly as he had seized them, and walked away to the window that looked out upon the rain-washed garden. After a moment's hesitation, she stole after him. "Sebert, my love, what is it? Trouble is in your mind, there is little use to deny it. Dearwyn says it concerns me, but I know that it is no less than the King. Dear one, it seems strange that you cannot disclose your mind to me as well as to — Fridtjof."

It was the first time, in their brief meetings together, that she had spoken that name, and his smile answered. Even while his lips admitted a trouble, his manner put it aside. "You are right that it concerns the King, my elf. Sometimes the work he assigns me is neither easy nor pleasant to accomplish. Yet without any blame to him, most warlike maiden, for — "

But she would not be prevented from saying stern things of her royal guardian, so at last he let her finish the subject, and stood pressing her hands upon his breast, his eyes resting dreamily on her face.

When she had finished, he said slowly, "Sweeting, because my mind is laboring under so many burdens that my wits are even duller than they are wont, will you not have the patience to answer one question that is not clear to me? Do you think it troublesome to tell me why it was that you said, that day in the garden — Now shake off that look, dearest; never will we speak

of it again if it is not to your wish! Tell me what you meant by saying that you came into Canute's camp because you had too much faith in Rothgar, if you despise him — since you despise him so?"

Her eyes met his wonderingly. "By no means could I have said that, lord. When I left home, I knew not that Rothgar lived. The one in whom I had too much faith was the King. Because I was young and little experienced, I thought him a god; and when I came to his camp and found him a man, I thought only to escape from him. That was why I wore those clothes, Sebert — not because I liked so wild a life. That is clear to you, is it not?"

He did not appear to hear her last words at all. He was repeating over and over, "The King, the King!" Suddenly he said, "Then I got that right, that it was he who summoned me to Gloucester to make sure that you had kept your secret from me also? — that he was angry with you for deceiving him?"

"Yes," she said. But as he opened his lips to put another question, she laid her finger-tip beseechingly upon them, "Sebert, my love, I beg of you let us talk no more of those days. Sometime, when we have a long time to be together, I will tell you everything that I have had in my breast and you shall show me everything that you have had in yours, but — but let us wait, sweetheart, until our happiness seems more real than our sorrow. Even yet I do not like the thought of the 'sun-browned boy-bred wench.'" She laughed a little unsteadily at the sudden crimsoning of his

face. "And I am still ashamed — and ashamed of being ashamed — that I showed you so plainly what my heart held for you . . . Elfgiva's tongue has stabbed me sore . . . Beloved, can you not be content, for now, with knowing that I have loved no man before you and shall love none after you?"

Bending, he kissed her lips with the utmost tenderness. "I am well content," he said. And after that they spoke only of the future, when the first period of his Marshalship should be over and he should be free to take his bride back to the fields and woods of Ivarsdale, and the gray old Tower on the hill.

CHAPTER XXX

WHEN THE KING TAKES A QUEEN

Moderately wise
Should each one be,
But never over-wise;
For a wise man's heart
Is seldom glad
If he is all-wise who owns it.

HÁVAMÁL.

UT under the garden's spreading fruit trees, the little gentlewomen of Elfgiva's household were amusing themselves with the flock of peacocks that were the Abbey's pets. In a shifting dazzling mass of color—blended blue and green and golden fire—all but one of the brilliant birds were pressing around Candida, who scattered largess from a quaint bronze vase, while the one whose vanity was greater even than its appetite was furnishing sport for Dearwyn as she strutted after him in merry mimicry, lifting her satin-shod feet mincingly and trailing her rosy robes far behind her on the grass. The old cellarer, to whose care the birds fell

except during those hours when the brethren were free for such indulgences, watched the scene in grinning delight; and Leonorine laughed gaily at them over the armful of tiny bobbing lap-dogs, whose valiant charges she was engaged in restraining. The only person who seemed out of tune with the chiming mirth was the Lady Elfgiva herself. Among the blooming bushes she was moving listlessly and yet restlessly, and each rose she plucked was speedily pulled to pieces in her nervous fingers. A particularly furious outburst from the dogs, followed by peals of ringing laughter, brought her foot down in a stamp of utter exasperation.

"Will you not observe my feelings, if you have none of your own?" she demanded. "Leonorine, take those wretched dogs out of my hearing. Dearwyn, lay aside your nonsense and go ask Gurth if he has heard anything yet of Teboen." She stamped again, angrily, as her eye went from one to another of the merry-makers. "I suppose it would gladden all of you to feel safe from her hand, but I will plainly tell you that if harm has happened to her, you will find a lair-bear pleasanter company than I shall be."

The dull red that mottled her face and neck was a danger signal whose warning her attendants had learned to heed, and they scattered precipitately. Only the old cellarer, herding his gorgeous flock with waving arms, ventured to address her.

"Is it the British woman you are enquiring after, lady? The woman who comes to the lane-gate, of a morning, to get new milk for your drinking?"

Elfgiva turned quickly. "Yes,—Teboen my nurse. Have you seen her?"

"I saw her between cockcrowing and dawn, noble one, when I let down the bars for the cattle to come in to the milking. The herd-boy who drives them said something to her, — it seemed to me that he named a Danish name and said that person was waiting in the wood to speak with her, — whereat she set down her pitcher and went up the lane. I have not seen her since."

The lady's little white hands beat the air like a frightened child's. "Three candles have burned out since then; it is certain that evil has befallen her. Never since I was born has she left me for so long. I —" She paused to gaze eagerly toward a figure that at this moment appeared in the low arch of the doorway. "Tata! do you bring me news of her?"

Though she shook her head, Randalin's manner was full of suppressed excitement as she advanced. "Not of her, lady, yet tidings, great tidings! The King has sent —"

"His Marshal again? I will not see him."

"Nay, the Marshal but accompanies the messenger. In truth, lady, it is my belief that the token has accomplished its mission. The message is brought by Thorkel Jarl, as this has not been done before."

"Earl Thorkel?" Elfgiva cried. "By the Saints, it can be nothing less than the token!" She dropped down upon the rustic seat that stood under the green canopy of the old apple tree and sat there a long time,

staring at the grass, her cheeks paling and flushing by turns. Presently, she drew a deep breath of relief. "I was foolish to fret myself over Teboen. Since she is clever enough to bring this to pass, she is clever enough to take care of herself. Without doubt it was the Danish wizard, and he informed her of some new herb, and she has gone to fetch it."

After a while, an enchanting smile touched her lips. "Surely, a rose garden is a fitting place to receive the ambassadors of a lover," she said, and straightened herself on her rustic throne, sweeping her draperies into more graceful folds. "Bring them to me here, ladybird. Candida, fetch hither the lace veil from my bower, and call the other maids as you go, and all the pages you can find. Since Teboen is not by, I want all of you behind me. I cannot help it that the Tall One always gives me the feeling of a lamb before a wolf."

Even had the likeness never occurred to her before, it would not have been strange if she had thought of it to-day as, followed by the Marshal and preceded by their fair usher, the old warrior came across the grass to the little court under the apple tree. The keenness of the hooded eyes that looked out at her from his grizzled locks, the gleam of the white teeth between his bearded lips as he greeted her, was unmistakably wolfish. She relapsed into a kind of lamb-like tremor as she invited them to be seated and commanded the attendance of her cup-bearer. When she caught sight of the misery of discomfort in Sebert's frank face, she lost

her voice entirely and waited in utter silence while they drank their wine.

Yet Thorkel's manner was unwontedly genial when at last he broached his errand. "You lack the eagerness that is to be expected, lady," he said as he gave his mouth a last polish with the delicate napkin. "How comes it that you have not guessed I bring you a message from the King?"

She answered doubtfully that the King had not behaved to her so that his messages were apt to be anticipated with much pleasure.

"But it has never occurred that I brought you this kind of news before," he tempted her. "Will it not interest you to hear that at last the Palace is ready for a Queen?"

That startled her a little out of her wariness, crying the last two words after him with an eagerness of inflection that was as pathetic as though her heart were concerned.

His lips gave out a flash as he nodded. "A Queen. Canute is going to give the Angles a 'gift of the elves.'"

For an instant, she was betrayed into believing him, and bent forward, her flushing face transfigured with delight. She was starting to speak when the Etheling rose abruptly from his seat.

"Lord Thorkel," he said angrily, "this cat-play would bring you little thanks from your King, nor will I longer endure it. I pray you to explain without delay that the name of 'Elfgiva' is borne also by Emma of Normandy."

Then the old man snarled as a wolf does whose bone has been seized. "Lord of Ivarsdale, you act in the thoughtless way of youth. I was bringing the matter gently —"

But the young man accomplished his purpose in spite of the elder. He did not address the King's wife — indeed, he refrained even from looking at her — but he spoke swiftly to the dark-haired girl who stood beside the seat. "Randalin, I beg you to tell your lady that Elfgiva Emma, who is Ethelred's widow and the Lady of Normandy, arrives at Dover to-morrow to be made Queen of the English."

As all expected, the Lady of Northampton started up shrieking defiance, screaming that it should not be so, that the King was her husband and the soldiers would support her if the monks would not, that he was hers, hers, — and more to that effect, until the plunging words ran into each other and tears and laughter blotted out the last semblance of speech. That she would end by swooning or attacking them with her hands those who knew her best felt sure, and maids and pages crept out of her reach as hunters stand off from a wounded boar. But at the point where her voice gave out and she whirled to do one or perhaps both of these, her eyes fell on the house-door, and her expression changed from rage to amazement and from amazement to horror. Catching Randalin's arm in fear, not anger, she began to gasp over and over the name of Teboen the nurse.

Those whose glance had not followed hers, thought her mad and shrank farther; but the eyes of those who

saw what she did reflected her look. In the doorway the British woman was standing, wagging her head in time to a silly quavering song that she was singing with lips so distorted as to be almost unrecognizable. Her once florid face was ashen gray, and now as she quitted the door post and came toward them she reeled in her walk, stumbling over stones and groping blindly with her huge bony hands. But still she kept on singing, with twisted lips that strove to simper, and once she tried to sway her ungainly body into an uncouth dancing-step that brought her floundering to her knees.

"A devil has possession of her," Elfgiva shrieked. "Take her out of my sight, or I shall go mad! Take her away — take her away!" Shrieking in wildest terror she fled before her, and for a moment the garden seemed given over to a grotesque game of blind-man's buff as women and boys scattered with renewed screaming at each approach of the ghastly face. It did not stop until the two soldiers who had been made keepers of the wretched creature came running out of the house and led her away.

Then it was Thorkel's sardonic voice that brought the Lady of Northampton back to herself. "Now, is this how you take the sight of your own handiwork? Or is it because you regret that the King is not in this plight? One mouthful and no more has she had of the blood of the coiled snake."

Stopping where she was, Elfgiva gazed at him, and with a dawning comprehension came back her interrupted fury. "The coiled snake," she repeated slowly;

and after that, in a rush of words, "Then it was you who enticed her away and mistreated her? But what does it concern *you* that I sent a snake? Where saw you it? How knew you it had blood?" Without waiting for an answer, she turned upon the Marshal, her lids contracted into narrow slits behind which her eyes raged like prisoned animals. "It is you who are to blame for this! You who miscarried my message. You have betrayed me, and I tell you —" Hysterical tears broke her voice, but she pieced it together with her temper and went on telling him all the bitter things she could think of, while he stood before her in the grim silence of one who has long foreseen the disagreeable aspects of his undertaking and made up his mind to endurance.

When she stopped for breath, he said steadily, "I declare with truth that you cannot dislike what I have done much more than I, Lady of Northampton. I hope it will be an excuse with you, as it is a comfort to me, that instead of fetching you into trouble —"

Thorkel took the words from his lips, and no longer with sinister deliberation but with a ferocity that showed itself in the gathering swiftness of his speech. "Trouble — yes! By the Hammer of Thor, I think you deserve to have trouble! Had any of your witches' brew done harm to the King, I can tell you that you would not have lived much longer. What! Are the plans of men to be upset by your baby face, and a kingdom lost because a little fool chooses to play with poison as a child with fire?"

"Poison?" she screamed. She had been facing him with whitening lips, and now the little breath that she had left went from her in a sharp cry. "Not poison; love-philtres! To win him back! Love-philtres, — can you not hear?"

"Love-philtres!" The old warrior's voice made the words bite with contempt. "Did the mouthful she swallowed have that effect upon your woman? Or do you think you planted love in the breasts of the dead scullions? Had you seen their writhings I think you would have called it by another name."

He was standing over her now, and she was cowering before him, her shaking hands rising as though to ward off his eyes. "I meant no harm," she was wailing with stiff lips. "The scroll said not a word that it was hurtful. Do not kill me. I meant no —" The word ended in an inarticulate sound and she swayed backward.

It was Randalin who caught and eased her down upon the rustic chair, and Randalin who turned upon the Tall One. "Saw I never a meaner man!" she cried. "Certainly I think Loke was less wolf-minded than you. You know very well that if Teboen had thought it would become a cause of harm to her, she would have refused to swallow it. I will go to the King myself and tell him how despisable you are." She stamped her foot at the united ministry of the Kingdom as she turned her back upon its representatives to speak reassuringly to her mistress.

Her lover did not blame her that her flashing eyes seemed to include him among the objects of their wrath. He said fiercely to the Jarl, "For God's sake, tell her that no one suspects her of seeking his life, and give her his true message, or I will go and hang myself for loathing."

"Tell her yourself!" the old Dane snapped. "It is seen that you are as rabbit-hearted as the boy who makes her such an offer. Were I in his place, I would have them all drowned for a litter of wauling kittens." He looked very much indeed like a wolf in a sheepfold as he stamped to and fro, grinding his spurred heels into the patches of clover and growling in his beard.

The young soldier had been known to ride into battle with a happier face, but the sudden gritting of his teeth implied that he would do anything to get the matter over with; and having braved the outburst of hysterics that redoubled at his approach, he managed to slip a soothing word into the lull.

"Lady, the King sends you none but good greetings. It would make you feel better if you would listen to them."

"Then he — he does not blame me for this?" Elfgiva quavered at last.

"He does not blame you," the Marshal hastened to reassure her. "And in token thereof he sends you your heart's desire."

Plainly, the elves had endowed their "gift" with a wit to match her soul. Her beautiful eyes were simple as an injured child's as she raised them to his. "How

can that be, lord, when Emma of Normandy is to get the crown of England? A woman ten years older than he, to put the best face on it! Who can expect me to bear with this insult?" Her scorn went so far toward reviving her that for the first time she drew herself away from the support of her women, and even made one of them a sign to rearrange the locks she had disturbed.

Lest it revive her beyond the point of docility, Sebert spoke the rest of his message in some haste. "It is true, noble one, that for state reasons the King has consented to this union with Emma of Normandy, who will bring him the friendship of Duke Richard besides causing pleasure to the English. But the crown of Denmark is also at his disposal, lady, and this he purposes to bestow upon your son Sven, for whom he has much love. And it is his will and pleasure that you accompany the boy across the sea and, together with the earls of his guardianship, hold the power for him until his hands shall be big enough to grasp it alone. For this he gives you the name of 'queen' and all the honor you shall desire." He paused, more at the wonder of watching her face than because he had finished.

It was as though a rainbow had been set in her showery eyes. "He purposes this?" she murmured; and rose out of her seat in a kind of ecstasy, — then caught at its back, glooming with doubt. "I cannot believe it, — it is too beautiful. Swear that you are not mocking me."

"I swear it," he said gravely, but his lips curled a little as he watched her delight bring back her color, her smiles, her every fairy charm.

Throwing her arms about Dearwyn, who chanced to be nearest, she kissed her repeatedly. "Think, mouse, — a queen! a queen! It was not for naught that I dreamed an eagle flew over my head. Ah, how I shall cherish the dear little one who has brought me this!" With her pleasure overflowing as of old in rippling laughter, she turned to greet the King's foster-father who came stalking toward her. "Now your ill humor no longer appears strange to me, noble wolf, — than which no better proof could be had that I have come into good fortune! I pray you tell me when I am to leave, and who goes with me, and every word of the plan, for I could eat them like sweets."

"Ulf Jarl will feed your ears later," Thorkel said gruffly. "Your safety on the road is the charge of this battle-sapling." He jerked his head toward the young Marshal. "You will leave for Northampton this afternoon, to get the boy — and to get rid of you before the Lady of Normandy arrives."

The shaft fell pointless as she turned her sparkling face toward her women. "You hear that, my lambs? This afternoon, — not one more night in this prison! You cannot apply yourselves too soon to the packing, Candida, Leonorine. And I must see if Teboen's wits have come back to her. If she should not be restored to them, that would be one bee in the honey. Randalin, learn what disposal is to be made of you, and that,

quickly. Nobles, if I am not yet enough queen to dismiss you, still am I queen enough to depart without your leave. I desire you will thank your King as is becoming; and tell him that I am right glad he was not poisoned, — and I trust he will not wish he had been, after he has seen his ancient bride." Chiming the sweet bells of her laughter, she glided away among her excited attendants, the silver mockery reaching them after she had vanished into the house.

Randalin awoke to a sense of bewilderment. "It is true that I do not know where to go, now that this place is upset."

The question was repeated in her lover's attitude; but Thorkel Jarl answered it, coming between them and drawing her aside.

"I will remedy that," he said. "My men are to fetch you to the Palace so soon as ever your lady has left. The King has a use for you." The rest he spoke into her ear, but its effect was to blanch her cheeks and cause her hands to clasp each other in terror as she started back.

"I cannot!" she cried. "I cannot."

"You must," he said harshly. "Or you will do little credit to the blood that is in you. Do you no longer think your father and brother of any importance?"

"They are pitiless to demand it of me," she murmured, and buried her face in her hands.

Anger leaped from the young noble's eyes as, in his turn, he came between her and the Jarl. He said

forcefully, "No one shall ask anything of you that you do not want, nor shall any king compel you. Yet I think I have a right to know what his will is with you."

"You have not," the Dane contradicted. "Do you think the King's purposes are to be opened to the sight of every Angle who becomes his man? Nor have you any right soever over her who is the King's ward. End this talk, maiden, and give me your promise to be obedient."

She gave it in a cry of despair, "I must — I know I must!" then sought to make peace with her lover by laying caressing hands on his breast. "And he is right, love, that I ought not to tell any one. It is another one of those things that you must trust."

But for once the Etheling's will did not bend to her coaxing; his mouth was doggedly set as he looked down upon her. "I trust no man I do not know," he answered, "and I do not know Canute the man, — nor do I greatly like what I have heard of him, or this plan of sending me from the City at this time. You have no cause to reproach me with lack of faith in you, Randalin, for when every happening — even your own words — made it appear as if it were love for Rothgar Lodbroksson which brought you into the camp, I looked into your eyes and believed them against all else." In the intensity of the living present he forgot the dead past — until he saw its ghosts troop like gray shadows across her face.

"Love for Rothgar Lodbroksson?" she repeated, drawing back. "Then you did believe that I could love

Rothgar?" Her voice rose sharply. "You believed that I followed him!"

Too late he saw what he had done. "I said that I did *not* believe it," he cried hastily. "What I thought at first in my bewilderment, — that could not be called belief." Now it was the present that he had forgotten in the past, as he strove desperately to recapture the phantoms and thrust them back into their graves.

But she did not seem to hear his explanation as she stood there gazing at him, her mind leaping lightning-like from point to point. "It was that which made you behave so strangely in the garden," she said, and she spoke each phrase with a kind of breathless finality. "You thought that I — I was like those — those other women in the camp." As he tried to take her hand she drew farther away, and stood looking at him out of eyes that were like purple shadows in her white face. It was with a little movement of anger that she came to herself at last. "And what are you thinking of me now? Do you dare to dream that the King —" Turning, she confronted the old warrior fiercely. "Thorkel Jarl, I ask you to tell the Lord of Ivarsdale as quick as you can what the King wants with me."

"That I will not do," the Jarl said quickly. "You know no prudence, maiden. The Lord of Ivarsdale is also English; a mishap might occur if —"

She flung the words at him; "I care not if it lose Canute his crown! If you will not risk it, I will tell him that the King settles to-night with Edric of Mercia and his men, and that it is to witness the punishment

of my kinsmen's murderer that he has sent for me. As for my camp-life, ask Rothgar himself, or Elfgiva, or the King — or any soldier of the host! Of them all, you alone have thought such thoughts of me." She flung up her hands against him in a kind of heart-broken rage. "You! To whose high-mindedness I trusted everything I have!" Hiding her face, she ran from them, sobbing, into the house.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE TWILIGHT OF THE GODS

Circumspect and reserved
Every man should be,
And wary in trusting friends;
Of the words
That a man says to another
He often pays the penalty.

HÁVAMÁL.

AKING to tapestried walls and jewelled lanterns and a strange splendor of furnishings, Randalin experienced a moment of wild bewilderment. What had happened to the low-ceiled dormitory with its bare wall-spaces splotched with dampness? What had become of the row of white beds, with Dearwyn's rosy face on the next pillow? And she herself — why was she lying on the outside of the covers, with all her clothes on, a cramped aching heap? Rising on her elbow, she gazed wonderingly at the frowzy woman stretched near her on a pallet. It was not until the woman turned over, puffing out her fat cheeks in a long breath, that the girl on the bed recognized her and knew what room this

was and remembered what had happened to separate to-day from all the yesterdays of her life. Falling down upon the pillows, she lay with her face hidden among them, living over with the swift sharpness of a renewed brain the scenes of the previous night.

As she had seen it from the gallery where the King's soldiers had hidden her, she saw again the great stone hall, enshrining a feasting-table around which a throng of nobles in their gorgeous dresses and their jewels and their diadems made a glittering halo. At the farther end, the King sat in his shining gilded chair. Just below her, was Edric of Mercia with Norman Leofwinesson beside him. She could not see their faces for their backs were toward her, but now and again the Gainer's velvet voice rose blandly, and each time she was seized with shuddering. How was it possible that he did not feel disaster in the air? To her it seemed that the very torch-flames hissed warnings above the merriment, while the occasional pauses were so heavy with doom that their weight was well-nigh unendurable; at each, she was forced to fight down a mad impulse to scream and scatter the hush.

Then the light from the taper which a page was holding behind Norman of Baddeby fell upon the gemmed collar that was his principal ornament, and the sight wrought a subtle change in her mood. The collar had been her father's; she could not look at it without seeing again his ruddy old face with its grim mouth and faded kindly eyes. Beside this vision rose another, — the vision of this beloved face dead in the moonlight,

with Fridtjof's near it, his brave smile frozen on his young lips. From that moment, softness and shrinking died out in her bearing as out of her heart, and her blood was turned to fire within her, — the liquid fire of the North. Hour after hour, she sat in rigid waiting while the endless line of servants ran to and fro with their silver dishes and the merriment grew and spread and the clinking came faster and louder and the voices grew thicker and wilder.

When the wave of good-will and fellowship had reached its height, like one who would ride in upon its crest the Gainer rose to his feet and began speaking to the King. His manner was less smoothly deferential than when addressing Edmund, she noticed, affecting more the air of bluff frankness which one might who wished to disarm any suspicion of flattering; but she could not hear what he said because of the noise around him. The first words she heard distinctly were Canute's, as he paused with upraised goblet to look at the Mercian. Like an arrow his voice cleft the uproar, so that here and there men checked the speech on their lips to look at him, and their neighbors, observing them, paused also, until the lull extended from corner to corner.

"Strangely do you ask," he said. "Why should I give you more than Edmund gave you?"

She had no difficulty in hearing Edric this time. Aggressively honest, his words rang out with startling sharpness: "Because it was for you that I went against Edmund, and from faithfulness to you that I afterwards destroyed him."

Out of the stillness that followed, a voice cried, "Are you mad?" and there was the grating of chairs thrust hastily back. But, after a great wrench, her heart stood still within her as through the madness she perceived the purpose. As well as Edric of Mercia she knew that the young Viking's vulnerable point was his longing for his own self-esteem, a craving so unreckoning in its fervor that — should he have the guilty consciousness the traitor counted on — rather than endure his own reproach for cowardice he would be equal to the wild brazenness of flinging the avowal in the teeth of his assembled court. Her pulses began to pound in a furious dance as the same flash of intuition showed her the rock upon which the Gainer's audacious steering was going to wreck him.

For no skulking guilt was in the face of the new King of England as he met the startled glances, but instead a kind of savage joy that widened his nostrils and drew his lips away from his teeth in a terrible smile.

"Now much do I thank whatever god has moved you to open speech," he said, "for with every fibre of my body have I long wanted to requite you for that faithfulness. Knowing that you were coming to-night to ask it, I have the reward ready. Never was recompense given with a better will." Leaping to his feet, he hurled the goblet in his hand against the opposite wall so that it was shattered on the stone behind the embroidered hangings. At the signal the tapestry was lifted, and in the light stood Eric of Norway, leaning on a mighty

battle-axe. To him the King cried in a loud voice, all the irony gone from it, leaving it awful as the voice of Thor at Ragnarok. "Do your work where all can see you, Eric Jarl, that no man shall accuse me of being afraid to bear my deeds. And let Norman Leofwinesson die with his lord for the slaying of Frode of Avalcomb."

A roar of hideous sound — a confusion of overturned lights, of screeching servants, of writhing struggling bodies — above it all, the vision of that glittering axe poised in the air — then flashing downward, — Randalin's recollections blurred, ran together, and faded out in broken snatches.

She recalled a brief space of something like sleep-walking as the soldiers led her through branching corridors to this room, and fetched for her attendant the only woman available, a wench they had taken from trencher-washing in the royal kitchen. She remembered irritably rejecting the woman's clumsy services and sending her to sleep on her pallet, while she herself walked to and fro with her surging thoughts until sheer physical exhaustion forced her to throw herself upon the bed. After that she remembered — nothing.

"I am glad that I did not disgrace my kin by screaming or fainting," she reflected now, as she raised herself stiffly. "I am glad I did that much credit to my name." She flushed as her hand, touching the pillow, found it wet, and for an instant the bearing of her head was less erect. "I do not remember what I dreamed," she murmured, "but full well I know that it was not because Norman Leofwinesson is slain that I shed tears

in my sleep." For a while she drooped there, her eyes on the open window, outside of which a robin was singing blithely among the cherries. But all at once she seized the pillow with a kind of fierceness, and turned it over and piled the others on top of it, crying under her breath, "How dared he! How dared he! I will shed no tears for him while I am awake. I will remember only that I am my father's daughter and the Lady of Avalcomb."

Proudly as became an odal-woman, she followed the page when he came at last to call her to the royal presence. The great stone hall in which the King awaited the arrival of his Norman bride was the same room in which he had feasted the night before, but tables and dishes now were gone, gold-weighted tapestries hung once more over the door by which Eric of Norway had made his entrance, and a rich-hued rug from an Eastern loom lay over the spot where she had seen the axe rise and fall. Crossing the threshold, the commonplaceness of it all clashed so discordantly with the scene in her memory that for an instant she grew faint and clung to the curtains between which she was passing. That death should leave so little trace, that the spot which one night was occupied by a headsman, the next, should hold a bride, made her fancy reel with horror even while she pulled herself together sternly.

"This is life as in truth it is," she said. "It is well that I understand at last how terrible everything really is, and how little anything matters." Forcing herself to tread the rug with steady step, she came where the

King stood by an open window. He was as changed as the room, though in honor of his bride he wore again state robes of silk and cloth-of-gold, for the fire of the Northern lights was gone out of his face, leaving it dull and lustreless. In the garden below, a minstrel was making hay in the sun of the royal glance by a rapid improvising of flattering verses which he was shouting lustily to his twanging harp, but now the King's hand rose curtly.

"Your imagination has no small power, friend, yet save some virtues in case you should want to sing to me again," he advised as he tossed down a coin and turned away.

His ward courtesied deeply before him. "For your justice, King Canute, I give you thanks drawn from the bottom of my heart," she said.

"I welcome you to your own, Lady of Avalcomb," he answered as he returned her salutation. Leaning against the window frame he stood a long while looking at her in silence, — so long that she was startled when at last he spoke. "Yet for the good of the realm, I must lay on your odal one burden, Frode's daughter."

"What is that, King?"

"It is that before the year is out you take a husband who shall be able to defend your land in time of need."

Her white cheeks went very red before him and then grew very pale again, while her breast rose and fell convulsively. But she clasped her hands over it as though to still its protest and, suddenly, she flung up her head in a kind of trembling defiance. "What

does it matter? King, I know what a Danish woman owes her race. Choose you the man and this shall, like other things, be as you wish."

It was evident that her answer took him by surprise, for he bent from the wall to observe her. "*I* choose!" he repeated. "Have you then no choice?"

She tried to say "No"; she tried desperately to say it; but already her courage was crumbling under her. All at once she took her hands from her breast to hold them out pleadingly, and her voice was broken: "Lord, let me go back to Avalcomb — now — to-day!"

"Wherefore to-day?" he asked. "I had thought you would remain here for a while and get honor from Queen Emma." A moment he looked away from her, out of the window at the drifting clouds. "I can tell you, Frode's daughter, that while she is noble in her birth, she is still nobler in her mind," he said gravely. "Little would there be in her service for you to take ill. I think it possible that she might be highly helpful to you. There is that about her which makes the good in one come out and bask like a snake in the sun, while the evil slinks away shadow-like —"

She interrupted him with a cry that was half a sob. "Lord King, I cannot bear it to see more people that are strange to me! Since I left my father's house I have felt the starkness of strangers, and now — now I can endure it no longer. My heart within me is as though it were bruised black and blue. Let me go back where all know me, — where none will hold me off at arm's length to challenge me with his eyes, but all love me and

place faith in me because they know me. Lord, give me leave to go home, — pray it of you! Beseech it of you!" Entreating, she would have fallen at his feet if he had not caught her hands and stayed her.

He did not release them immediately but tightened his grasp as his eyes, grown suddenly keen, searched her face. His voice dropped low. "Randalin, it is very unlikely that Elfgiva's scratches have brought you to this. Do you stand in need of reminding that any man who has angered you has angered me? That my sword lies under your hand?"

Her face seemed to have become glass before him, through which he looked into the innermost chambers of her mind. Terror-stricken, she snatched her hands away to cover it. "No, no!" she cried wildly. "I am angry with no one. I have found fault with no one. Draw no sword for me — only let me go!"

Again he turned from her and stood looking out at the clouds; but when at last he spoke, his voice was the gentlest she had ever heard it. "You are wise in this, as in other things, Frode's daughter," he said, "and you shall certainly have your way. I take it that I am your guardian to protect you from harm, not to force you into things you do not want. Soldiers I can trust shall go with you, in case there be danger from Norman's people, and for women — "

She spoke up eagerly, "There is an old nun at Saint Mildred's, King, who loves me. I think she would come to me until others could be found."

"Go then," he granted. "Thorkel shall see to it that men and horses are ready when you are." He held out his hand, but when she took it in both of hers and would have saluted it reverently, he would not let her but instead raised her fingers to his lips. An odd note was in his voice. "Heavy is it for my tongue to say farewell to you, Frode's daughter," he said, "for your friendship has surpassed most other things in pleasantness to me."

Frank liking mingled with gratitude and reverence as she looked up at him. "I have got great kindness and favor from you, King Canute; I pray that you will be very happy with your Queen."

A moment he pressed his lips to her hand; then gently set it free. "I give you thanks," he returned, "but happiness is for me to wish you. The best you can ask for me is that sometime I shall become what you believed me to be the day you came to me at Scoerstan."

She tried to tell him that she believed him that now, — but something in her forbade the untruth. She could do no more than leave him, with a mute gesture of farewell.

Perhaps her gaze was not quite clear as she crossed the room, for she did not see that the door-curtains were moving until she was close upon them, when they were thrust apart to admit the form of Rothgar Lodbroksson. Stifling a gasp, she shrank behind a tall chair.

He did not see her, however, for his eyes were fastened upon the King, who had turned back to the

window. He had cast aside the splendor of the royal guards, wearing over his steel shirt a kirtle of blue that made his florid face seem redder and gave to his fiery hair a hotter glow. Two sentinels carrying shining pikes had followed him in, uncertainly, and now one plucked at his arm. But the Jotun shook him off to stride forward, clanking his heels with intentional noisiness upon the stone floor.

At the clatter the King looked around, and the tone in which he spoke his friend's name had in it more of passion than all the lover's phrases he had ever paid Elfgiva's ears. At the same time, he made a sharp sign to the two sentinels. "Get back to your posts," he said.

Hesitating they saluted and unwilling they wheeled, while one spoke bluntly over his shoulder. "It would be better to let us stay, King, if you please. You are weaponless."

"Go," Canute repeated.

In a moment the doors beyond the curtain had closed behind them, and the two men were alone save for the girl hiding forgotten in the shadow of the chair.

Rothgar laughed jarringly. "Whatever has been told about you, you have not yet been accounted a coward. But I do not see how you know I shall not kill you. I have dreamed of it not a few times."

Something like a veil seemed to fall over the King's face; from behind it he spoke slowly as he moved away to the dais upon which his throne-chair stood, and mounted the steps. "The same dream has come

to me, but never has it occurred to me to seek you out to tell you of it."

"No such purpose had I," the Jotun said with a touch of surliness. Pulling a bag from under his belt, he shook out of it upon the floor a mane of matted yellow hair. "If you want to know my errand, it is to bring you this. Yesterday it came to my ears that one of my men was suspected of having tried to give you poison through your wife's British thrall. I got them before me and questioned them, and the Scar-Cheek boasted of having done it. This is his hair. If you remember anything about the fellow, you understand that he was not alive when I took it from him."

The King looked immovably at the yellow mass. "You have behaved in a chieftain-like way and I thank you for it," he said. "But I would have liked it better if you had come to me about the judgment that raised this wall between us —"

Rothgar's throat gave out a savage sound. "Tempt me not! I am no sluggish wolf."

But Canute spoke on: "What I expected that day was that you would come to me, as friend comes to friend, and with my loose property I would redeem from you every stick and stone which my kingship had forced me to hold back. Not more than they have called me coward, have men ever called me stingy —"

"And when have men called me greedy?" the Jotun bellowed. "Your thoughts have got a bad habit of lying about me if they say that it was greed for land which made me take your judgment angrily. Ex-

cept for the honor of my stock, what want I with land while I have a ship to bear me? I tell you, now as heretofore, that it was your treachery which unsheathed a sword between us."

"Rothgar my brother,—" the veil was rent from the King's face and he had stepped from the dais and seized the other by the shoulders as though he would wrestle bodily with him, — "by the Holy Ring, I swear that I have never betrayed you! If you grudge not the land to the Englishman, you have no cause to grudge him anything under Ymer's skull. Can a man change his blood? — for so much a part of me is my friendship for you. Time never was when it was not there, and it would be as possible to fill my veins with Thames water as to put an Englishman into your place. Can you not understand — "

But Rothgar's hand had fallen upon the other's breast and pushed him backward so that he was forced to catch at the chair-arm to save himself from falling. "Never get afraid about that," he sneered. "Since we slept in one cradle, I have been a thick-headed Thrym and your Loke's wit has fooled me into doing your bidding and fighting your battles and giving you my toil and my limbs and my faith, but wisdom has grown in me at last. You undertake too steep a climb when you try to make me believe in your love while before my eyes you give to the man I hate my lands and the woman you had promised me and my place above your men — " His rage choked him so that he was obliged to break off and stand drawing his sword from his

sheath and slamming it back with a sharp sound. His voice came back in a hoarse roar. "When I reckon up the debt against you, I know that the only thing to wipe it out would be your life. Not taken by poison nor underhandedly, but torn out of your deceitful body as we stand face to face. If I could do that, it might be that my anger would be quenched." Again he drew his blade half out, — and this time he did not shove it back. His huge body seemed to draw itself together, crouching, as he leaned forward. "Why do you stand there looking as though you thought you were Odin? Do you think to blunt my weapon with your eyes? Why do you tempt me?"

The King had not moved away from the chair against which he had staggered, and the prints of his nails were on its arm. He was as though he had hardened to stone. "To show you that I am stronger than you, though I face you with bare hands," he said. "To show you that you dare not kill me."

"Dare not!" Rothgar's laughter was a hideous thing as he cleared at a bound the space between them. His sword was full-drawn now. "Shout for your guards! It may be that they will get here in time."

But the King neither gave back nor raised his voice. "I will not," he said, "nor will I lift hand against you. Never shall you have it to say that I forgot you had endangered your life for mine. On your head it shall be to break the blood-oath."

Now they were breast to breast. In her mind, the girl in the shadow flung open the doors and shrieked

to the sentinels and roused the Palace; in her body, she stood spellbound, voiceless, breathless.

Still Rothgar did not strike. It was the King who spoke this time also. "Among the sayings of men in Norway," he said coldly, "there is one they tell of a traitor who carried a sword of death against his King, but lacked the boldness to use it before the King's face. So he begged his lord to wrap a cloak around his head that he might get the courage to ask a boon. When that had been done, he stabbed. Do you want me to cover my eyes?"

With a hoarse cry, Rothgar flung his sword back to his sheath, recoiling, — there was even a kind of fear in his manner: "A fool would I be, to set your ghost free to follow me with that look on its face! Keep your life — and instead I will torture every Angle I can get under my grip, for it is they who have turned a great hero into a nithing — may they despise you as you have despised your people for their sakes!" Invoking the curse with a sweep of his handless arm, he strode from the room.

Randalin did not see when he passed her, for her eyes were on the King as he stood looking after his foster-brother.

"Ah, God, what a terrible world hast Thou made!" she murmured, as she put up her hands to ease the swelling agony in her throat. "No longer will I try to live in it. I will go to the Sisters and remain with them always."

Through the doors opening before the Jotun there

came in a sudden buzz of laughing voices, while a breeze brought through the window a ringing of bells and a clarioning of approaching horns. Upon the girl in the shadow and the King on the dais, the sounds fell like the dissolving of a spell. She ran swiftly to the little door behind the tapestry and let herself out unseen, unheard. The King mounted the throne he had won and sat there in regal state, facing the throng of splendid courtiers trooping in to give him their wedding greetings.

CHAPTER XXXII

IN TIME'S MORNING

He wins who woos.
HÁVAMÁL.

THE hot glare of a July sun was on the stones of the Watling Street and July winds were driving hosts of battling dust-clouds along the highway, but in the herb garden of Saint Mildred's cool shadows lay over the dew-beaded grass and all was restfulness and peace. The voice of the girl who was following Sister Wynfreda from mint clump to parsley bed, from fennel to rue, was not much louder than the droning of the bees in the lavender.

"If it be true as you say, —" she was speaking with the passionate bitterness of wounded youth, —"if it be true that in his place anyone would have believed what he believed, then is this a very hateful world and I want no further part in it."

Over the fragrant leaves which she was touching as fondly as if they had been children's faces, Sister

Wynfreda gently shook her head. "Think not that it is altogether through the world's evil-heartedness, dear child. Think rather that it is because mankind is not always brave and shrinks from disappointment, that it dares not believe in good until good is proved."

"I know that one dares not always believe in happiness, the girl conceded slowly, "for when my happiness was like a green swelling wave, white fear sprang from the crest of it and it fell — Sister, did that forebode my sorrow?"

Awhile, the nun's eyes widened and paled as eyes that see a vision, but at last she bowed her head to trace a cross upon her breast. "Not so; it is God's wisdom," she said, "else would the world be so beautiful that we would never hunger after heaven."

Mechanically, Randalin's hands followed hers through the holy sign; then she clasped them before her to wring them in impatient pain. "That is so long to go hungry, Sister! I shall be past my appetite." Dropping down beside the other, her slim young fingers began to imitate the gnarled old ones as they weeded and straightened. "I wonder at it, Sister Wynfreda, that you do not urge me to creep in with you. A year ago, you wanted it when I wanted it not; but now when I am willing, you hold me off."

"Is it clear before your mind that you are willing, my daughter?" the nun asked gently. As she drew herself to her feet with the aid of a bush, the cramping of her feeble stiffened muscles contracted her face in momentary pain, but her eyes were serene as the altar

lamps. "It lies upon you to remember, little sister, that those who would serve God around the altar must not go thither only because the world has mistreated them and they would cast it off to avenge the smart. She who puts on the yoke of Christ must needs do so because it is the thing she would desire of all, were all precious things spread out for her choosing. Can you look into my eyes and say that it would be so with you?"

Where she knelt before her, the girl suddenly threw her arms around the woman and hid her face in the faded robes. The frail hand stroked the dark hair affectionately.

"Think not that I would upbraid you with it, child as dear as my own heart. When the Power that took you from me led you back again, and I read what God's fingers had written on your face that before was like a lineless parchment, I could not find it in my mind to wish you otherwise. I felt only shame for the weakness of my faith, and joy past all telling."

Under the soothing hand, Randalin's sobs slowly ceased; when at last she raised her wet eyes there was no longer rebellion in them but only youth's measureless despair. "Sister, now as always, I want to do what you would have me — but I am so full of grief! Must I go back to Avalcomb and begin all over again? It seems to me that my life stretches before me no more alluringly than yonder dusty road, that runs straight on, on, over vast spaces but always empty."

The beauty that had been Sister Wynfreda's hovered now about her mouth as fragrance around a dead rose. Her gaze was on a branch above them where a little brown bird, calling plaintively, was slipping from her nest. Over the wattled edge, two tiny brown heads were peeping like fuzzy beech-nut rinds. "I wonder," she said, "what those little creatures up there will think when a few months hence the blue sky becomes leaden, such that no one of them ever before recollected it so dark, and the sun that is wont to creep to them through the leaves has gone out like a candle before the winter winds? By reason of their youth, I suppose they will judiciously conclude with themselves that there is never going to be any blue sky again, that their lives will stretch before them in a dark-hued stress of weather, empty of all save leafless trees and frozen fields. My fledgeling, will they not be a little ashamed of their short-sightedness when the spring has brought back the sun?"

The girl's lips parted before her quickening breath, and the old nun smiled at her tenderly as she moved away with her hands full of the green symbols of healing. "Settle not the whole day of your life at its morning, most dear child, but live it hour by hour," she said. "If you would be of use now, go gather the flowers for the Holy Table, and when themselves have drawn in holiness from the spot, then shall you bring them to the sick woman over the hill."

"Yes, Sister," the girl said submissively.

But when she had crossed the daisied grass and opened the wicket gate and came out into the fragrant lane, something seemed to divide her mind with the roses, for though she sent one glance toward the hedge, she sent another to the spot beyond — where the lane gave out upon the great Street to the City — and after she had walked a little way toward the flowers, she turned and walked a long way toward the road, until she had come where her eyes could follow its white track far away over the hills.

"I wonder if I shall ever hunger for heaven as I hunger for the sight of him," she murmured as she gazed.

But whatever the valleys might hold, the hillsides showed her nothing; sighing, she turned back. "It seems to me," she said, "that if we could have little tastes of heaven as we went along, then would there still be enough left and the road would seem much shorter." Sighing, she set to work upon the roses, that had twined themselves in a kindly veil over the bushes.

Standing so, it happened that she did not see the horseman who was just gaining the crest of the nearest hill between her and the City. The wind being from her, she did not even hear the hoof-beats until the horse had turned from the glare of the sun into the shadow of the fern-bordered lane. The first she knew of it, she glanced over her shoulder and saw the red-cloaked figure riding toward her along the grass-grown path.

As naturally as a flower opens its heart at the coming of the sun, she leaned toward him, breathing his

name; then in an impulse equally natural, as he leaped from his saddle before her, she drew back and half averted her face, flickering red and white like the blossoms she was clasping to her breast.

He stopped abruptly, a short stretch of grass still between them, — and it soothed her bruised pride a little that there was no longer any confident ease in his manner but only hesitation and uncertainty. His voice was greatly troubled as he spoke: "Never can I forgive myself for having wounded you, sweetheart, yet had I hoped that you might forgive me, because I knew not what I did and because I have suffered so sorely for it."

"*You* have suffered," she repeated with a little accent of bitterness.

"I beseech you by my love that you do not doubt it!" Hesitation gave way before a warmth of reproach. "For a man to know that he has wounded what he would have died to shield — that he has wronged where he would have given his life to honor — that it may be he has lost what is body and soul to him, — what else is that but suffering?"

It was only a very little that her face turned toward him, and he could not see how her downcast eyes were taking fire from his voice. He stood looking at her in despair, until something in the poise of her head taught him a new rune among love's spells. Drawing softly near her, he spoke in noblest conciliation: "Is it your pride that cannot pardon me, Lady of Avalcomb? Do I seem to sue for grace too boldly because I forget to make my body match the humbleness of my heart?

Except in prayer or courtesy, we are not loose of knee, we Angles, but I would stoop as low as I lowest might if that could make you kinder, dear one." Baring his head, he knelt down at her feet, — and the difference between this and the time when he had bent before her in the Abbey, was the difference between tender jest and tenderest earnest. "Thus then do I ask you to give me back your love," he said gently, — and would have said more but that she turned, stirred to a kind of generous shame.

"It needs not that, lord! I know you did not mean it. And they have told me that — that I have no right to be angry with you — " She broke off, as looking into his face she saw something that startled her into forgetfulness of all else. "Why are your cheeks so hollow?" she demanded. "And so gray — as though you had lost blood? Lord, what has come near you?"

He could not conceal the sudden pleasure he got out of her alarm for him, even while he answered as lightly as he could that it was no more than the fatigue of his three days in the saddle; and a lack of food, perhaps, as he had been somewhat pressed for time; and a lack of sleep because of —

But she was a warrior's daughter, and she would not be put off. Coming close to him, she pulled aside the dusty cloak, hot as a live coal in the glare of the day, and there — behold! — there were blood stains on the breast of his blue kirtle. Forgetful of everything else, she flung her arms around him as though to shield him. "Sebert, you are wounded! What is it?"

Nothing that troubled him very much, apparently, for his haggard face had grown radiant with gladness. Yet he was enough afraid of the reaction to answer her as gravely as possible: "It is Rothgar Lodbroksson, whom I met coming from the City as I was journeying back from my errand in Northampton. Little affection has ever passed between us, and this time something more than usual seemed to have stirred him against me, for —"

"He tried to kill you!" The words were not a question but a breathless assertion as she remembered the Jotun's last threat.

"He tried to kill me," the Marshal assented quietly. "And his blade did manage to pierce my mail; he is a giant in strength as in other things. But it cut no more than flesh; and after that, Fortune wheeled not toward him."

"You slew him!"

Her lips were white as she gasped it, but he knew now that it was no love for the Jotun that moved her, and he answered promptly to her unspoken thought: "No, sweet, — for the King's sake, I spared him. Before this, his men have taken him aboard his ship and England is rid of him."

Murmuring broken phrases of thanksgiving, she stood holding the cloak she had grasped, but he dreaded too much the moment of her awakening to await its coming inactive. Slipping his arms around her, he began to speak swiftly, the moment her silence gave him an opening.

"Never did I blame Rothgar much for his enmity against me, and now I thank him for this cut as for a gift, for through it I know that at least you have not outlawed me from your love. Dear one, as you are not unkind to so slight a thing as this wound in my flesh, so neither be without pity for the one that is so much deeper, in my heart! As the scratch stayed your anger for a while, so, in the gentleness of love, let this which is mortal stay it for all time."

With his arms around her, she could not shrink very far away, — nor was it seen that she tried to, — but all at once her words came in uneven rushes: "How can I hold anger against you when, with every breath, my lips sigh for your kisses? Yet let no one wonder at it that I am frightened. . . . You cannot conceive what a lurking place for terrors the world looks to me! Never, I think, shall I see men sitting together that I shall not suspect them of having murder in their hearts. Never shall I see two friends clasp hands but my mind will run forward to a time when they shall part in wrath and loneliness. Nay, even of the sound of my own voice I am afraid, lest whomsoever is hearing it — for all that he speak me fair — be twisting the words in his mind into evils I have not dreamed of. Sebert, I do not reproach you with it! I think it all the fault of my own blunders, — and therein I find a new terror. That one should suffer for wrong-doing is to be looked for, but if one is to be dealt with so unsparingly only for making mistakes, who knows where his position is or what to expect? Oh,

my best friend, make me brave or I am likely to die only through fearing to live! With my ignorance my boldness went from me, until now my courage is lowly as a willow leaf. Love, make me brave again!" Trusting, in her very declaration of distrust, she clung to him to save her from herself.

It was in the briar-pricked fingers, which he was pressing against his cheek, that he found his answer. Suddenly he spread them out in his palm before her, laughing with joyful lightness. "Randalin, the thorns wounded your hands the while that you stripped yonder hedge, but did you stop for that? If I can prove to you that all these dark days you have been but plucking roses, can you not bravely bear with the pricks?"

Putting her gently from him, he gathered up the spoils she had let fall, picking from among them with great care the fairest of either kind, while she, catching his mood, watched him April-faced.

"This," he said gaily, "is the red rose of my heart. Battle-fields lay between us and tower walls, and the way was long and hard to find, yet can you deny, my elf, that you came in and plucked it and wore it away in your hair, — to keep or to cast aside as pleased you?"

Smiles and tears growing together, she caught the blossom from him and pressed it to her lips. "I will wear it in my bosom," she answered, "for my breast has been empty — since the day I saw you first."

Smiling, he held out the white rose, but his mood had deepened until now he looked down upon her as he had looked down upon her in the moonlit forest. "This,

beloved, is the symbol of my faith," he said. "Your eyes took it from me that day at even-song. I hold it the dearer of the two, for with it goes my honor that is as stainless as its petals. It is worth more than life to me, — is it not worth some pricks to you?"

She took it from him reverently, to lay it beside the other, and as her face was too proud for fear so was it too tender for jesting. "I am more honored," she told him, "than Canute by his crown; and I will live as bravely to defend them."

But as he would have caught her to him, she leaned back suddenly to stretch a hand toward a dark-robed figure standing under the moss-grown arch, and her pride melted into a laugh of breathless happiness. "Sister Wynfreda, you were very right," she called softly, "the world can be so beautiful that one has no hunger for heaven."

THE END